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OVAL

Vol. XII · 2019



THE OVAL

Volume XII · 2019



The Oval is a literary magazine published annually by the Associated Students of the University of Montana (ASUM), The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, and the Creative Writing Program of the University of Montana English Department.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

I have the honor of presenting to you the twelfth volume of *The Oval*. The individual writers and artists featured in this issue have come together to form a diverse, imaginative collective of creative representation at the University of Montana. This year, our student contributors take us from the dirt beneath our feet to the stars above, offer us diverse cultural perspectives, and explore the beauty and brutality of being human. I've had the pleasure of working closely with my peers and our contributors of *The Oval* for the last two years, and in my time, I have seen the most promising creative work that our university has to offer. For many of our contributors, *The Oval: Vol. XII* is their first publication. We strive to publish the best work of our student body and remain a place where emerging artists can freely express themselves within our pages.

The Oval is only made possible by the generosity of ASUM, Megan Stark and the Mansfield Library, the Creative Writing Program, the English Department, Ken Price and the AlphaGraphics staff, and Kevin Head and the annual Writers' Fall Opus. Thank you for your valuable time and unending support.

Special thanks to our faculty advisor, Robert Stubblefield, who has nurtured the creative minds of both this magazine and the students who are lucky enough to come across his path. Thank you for your patience, your quick wit, and your confidence in our abilities. Your generosity and compassion touches all of us. Thank you to our technological advisor, Shannon Janssen, for your technological savvy and gentle guiding hand. And thank you to Carlos Medina for your poetic expertise and valuable perspective. Together, the three of you make us a group of writers and artists with a clear and passionate purpose.

I am grateful for our staff, without whom there would be no magazine, for your countless hours of reading, editing, and marketing, and for your fearless questioning of the familiar. A special thanks to our genre editors and our design and layout board, who took on the extra responsibilities of directing the editing process and forming a cohesive magazine. And to Luke Larkin, our design and layout editor, I am forever in your debt. You are the backbone of this issue. Thank you for your dedication, your voice, and your kind character. I am honored to have worked alongside everyone on this year's *Oval*. Thank you all for your brilliance.

More so than ever, I am grateful to every single student that submitted to this year's *Oval*. Thank you for sending us your stories, your poetry, your art. Your creative minds and your strong voices shape *The Oval* and allow us to continue to publish student work. You are the reason this magazine has prospered for twelve remarkable years, and you are the reason we will continue to thrive.

Happy reading,
Madison Haynes
Editor-in-Chief

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HEATWAVES

Julia White

The air around the train platform hangs heavy, oppressively hot, and so moist it feels like I'm breathing in lake water. The heat wave this summer began back in June, and I'm likely not to feel any relief until I'm gone or dead, whichever comes first, though I feel pretty close to dying right now. Everything going on with my body—the lack of sleep, the awful cramps raking their way across my abdomen, the stinging in my arm from when I twisted it hauling my suitcase up the escalator, the amount of *sweat*—is building up to a sensory hell that makes me want to accept my fate and lay down on the railway tracks.

It's 1:07. Twenty minutes till the Skyliner arrives. Nippori Station's saving grace at the moment is the air-conditioned waiting rooms and the vending machines with drinks and ice cream lining the platform, and even if the room's AC isn't doing much against the sheer intensity of the summer heat and all the steaming bodies packed inside, it still scores better than standing out in the open.

Lost in thought, I yelp suddenly as something icy cold brushes the back of my neck. It's just Cierra, in a similar state as me (sweaty, grimy, exhausted), but grinning and holding two bottles of water.

"Oh, thank God," I groan, and take it gratefully. "My savior."

She moves one of my bags off the next seat and collapses down into it. "Almost every single vending machine was out of water! I had to go all the way to the end of the platform. Can you believe it?"

"I can believe it." I sigh and settle in further.

We fall into an amicable silence. I lean on Cierra and close my eyes. I did the best I could tying my hair up, but a few frizzy curls still escaped, heavy and damp against the back of my neck. A bead of sweat runs from my scalp down my shoulder blades. It's a record-breaking heat wave in Japan this summer. Summer breaks are being extended in schools because most don't have centralized air-conditioning. There's been a national increase in hospital visits for heatstroke.

"*Are you sad to be leaving?*" everyone asks.

Get me out of here, I think.

But, despite my sluggishness, I'm acutely aware of Cierra's presence, the feeling of her skin against mine, and feel a sinking weight in my stomach when I think about what's coming. Our moments together are countable now.

"When I was at the Tully's near here the other day," I mumble into Cierra's shoulder, by way of distraction, and just to hear her voice, "I saw

a girl in a full-blown denim kimono. Not even a yukata. Full sleeves and layers and everything. *Denim.*”

She responds, quietly, “Just in the Tully’s?”

“Mm. The obi had a cat pattern on it. And her geta sandals were Chanel.”

“No joke, that sounds like the best look ever.”

“How’s she not dead, though? It’s been over 100 degrees for the past week.”

“People who can wear stuff like that,” Cierra muses, “are mostly the type to stay alive by sheer force of will, I think.”

A force of will I dearly wish I possessed as I rest my head heavier on her shoulder, energy spent. I feel myself melting, sloughing off in chunks onto the platform, and wonder if it would be nicer to lay down on the concrete and go to sleep. It wouldn’t be, because I’ve seen too many salarymen lying drunkenly in their own puke on train platforms for that to really be an appealing option, but maybe it’d be worth it just this once.

Instead I concentrate on breathing. Inhale in. Out. (Drown.)

I meet her first in a bar. A common-enough story.

Most people don’t know that Tokyo has one of the largest gay nightlives in the world. I was surprised to hear about it too, years ago when I found out, and years before I knew I was the type to be interested. Shinjuku Ni-Chome is just a few blocks from Shinjuku Station, the busiest train station in the busiest city in the world, but it’s not as well-known as the Kabuki-cho or Golden Gai areas. Despite being located in such a large city center, Ni-Chome feels hidden, somehow, gay bars and clubs and host clubs tucked away down side streets and up several flights of stairs. But you *know* when you’re there—you turn a corner, duck off the main road, wonder if you’re going the right way, and boom! All the rainbow pride flags make it pretty obvious.

I’m not much of a partier, but I’m down for it in certain circumstances, and I’d been wanting to check out Ni-Chome for a while anyway, when I’m invited by my friend, Kano. Kano knows a good bar that has karaoke and is women-only on Saturdays, which is pretty ideal when you’re a lesbian. The bar, called Goldfinger (yeah, I know), is tiny. It likely can’t even pack in fifty people, but it doesn’t have an entrance fee and it’s women-only and the DJ is *really* good, so I’m willing to drop a few thousand yen on overpriced drinks for this kind of energy.

It’s not that I’m a wallflower, but Kano is much more of a social butterfly, and in less than ten minutes she’s across the room shout-chatting with a group of European girls in the corner while I’m left alone. Oddly, I really don’t mind. Girls will nod at me and say hi as they pass by, or hand out compliments, sometimes engage in brief conversation, none of it awkward, or forced. It’s the beauty of being packed in a tight space with good music and a bunch of people who are Like You. Breaks down barriers.

(But the alcohol helps, too.)

An hour goes by. Kano tells me she's going to a club with the girls she met, invites me, I decline. I don't mind being by myself, and I like it here. I stand near the entrance and think about doing karaoke.

A girl stops at the bar. Short hair, orange dress with sneakers. Waiting for her drink—a rum and Coke—she compliments my shirt. I thank her and tell her, for some reason, that I got it from a poetry museum in Kyoto, which turns into *oh you like poetry? what kind? I'm not really into poetry but I like classical literature— oh, me too, but sometimes it's so dense and— I'm more into fine art— have you been to, have you seen— have you read—*

It's the nerdiest conversation two people can have while yelling over an Ed Sheeran song in a crowded bar. We haven't introduced ourselves yet.

"Are you hungry?" she asks all of a sudden. "I know a good place."

I'm thinking I like her, and I *am* hungry (made the rookie mistake of not eating before going out), so I slam back the rest of my 700-yen highball and let her lead me out into the backstreets of Ni-Chome.

Being hammered in Shinjuku is definitely an experience by itself—even off the main roads, the neon signs are bright as daylight and swirl like a kaleidoscope when I turn to take everything in. She takes my hand, casually, as if we did this every day, and we push through throngs of people away from Goldfinger and a few blocks down.

We tell each other our names on the way.

The clock above the platform reads 1:10.

I guzzle half my water bottle. Pop an ibuprofen.

"—home?"

"Hm?"

There's a guy to my left. Scraggly, blond, backpacker type.

"You heading home?" he asks, smiling. Nods at my luggage.

I wouldn't mind, except it's muggy and my guts hurt and my arm's been pulled from its socket and I got four hours of sleep, and. And.

"Yeah," I reply, briefly.

He says his name. It's swept away in a wave of irritation. There's a phrase in Japanese, *kuuki yomenai*, or "can't read the atmosphere," and it's pretty obvious that this guy can't.

"I'm heading to China, myself," he says, without being prompted. "I've been hitchhiking around here for a while but my visa's about up, so it's time to move on. Great country though, I've never seen so much—"

Andrew, was it? Ashton? Didn't it start with an A? It's polite to engage in conversation, right? It's rude to just ignore him, but. . .

"—back to New Zealand before—"

Fuck, I'm tired.

"You a student?" Austin asks.

"We're both students," Cierra cuts in, draping her arm over my shoul-

der. It's sticky and hot, but welcome. "But her program is over, so I'm seeing her off."

Her thumb traces circles on my skin. Alex glances from her, to me. Her again. His smile falters for just a second. I'm not sure what he's thinking, but I have a couple guesses, and it doesn't make me like him more. Like, sure, *now* he can read an atmosphere, huh.

"Nice of you to do that, in heat like this. I was wondering where you got the water," he says, pointing at the bottle in my hand. "Couldn't find any when I looked earlier."

"Far end of the platform," Cierra replies, at the same time I point listlessly.

"Thanks a bunch."

"It was nice to meet you, Aidan," Cierra says cheerily, but he's ducked away through the crowd of travelers and out of the waiting room.

I blink. "Was the name Aidan?"

"I don't know. I thought I heard Aidan."

I can't help but laugh, and try to turn to kiss her cheek, but bump into her ear instead. "I love you."

The place she takes me is a cozy burrito joint, on the third floor of a nondescript business building and even tinier than Goldfinger. Smaller than my shoebox apartment. It has a homey, down-to-earth feel and fits in nicely among the other businesses in Ni-Chome. In contrast to the bars and bustle of the streets below, the restaurant is quiet except for the muted discussion of the only other two patrons and the Japanese pop music playing over the stereo.

I'm drunk, so I don't think too much about what I'm ordering. Cierra seems about the same. I'm taking careful sips of water and trying to think how to stimulate the conversation when she beats me to the punch.

"So, where is it you go to school?"

"Meiji University in Ochanomizu, but I'm living in Sendagi."

"That's in Bunkyo Ward, yeah? Shit, I'm jealous. I wish I lived in the city. I'm stuck in Musashino—next to Nerima Ward, over in the west," she clarifies. Gestures in a vague direction that's probably not west. "A bit a ways away."

"Are you one of those people who thinks 'Tokyo city limits' means 'rural'?" I ask, without thinking.

Cierra snorts. "Nah. I'm actually from Texas originally—Dallas, but I've *seen* rural. I'm just living here now because it had the best options for grad school, and my grandparents are letting me squat with them anyway."

"That's really nice of them."

"They're great. They like poetry too."

I ask her about grad school and learn she's going for Japanese art history, and she asks about my exchange, which is less exciting, but she lis-

tens to me speak with full attention I've never received from anyone else. As if I'm not just enraptured by her, the way her fingers—long and slender, on artist's hands—absently tap the side of her glass, the pink flush under a spread of freckles across her face. Crooked smile, silk-soft hair.

We go quiet for a bit when our food comes out. Mexican or Tex-Mex food isn't uncommon in Tokyo, but *good* Mexican is hard to come across. This place is good, except for the part where I bite down on something tangy and unexpected, and Cierra snickers at my surprise. It's eggplant, which I never realized was a burrito food, but it's a brave new world...even if I do pick out any slices I come across.

"Are you much of a picky eater?" she asks, watching me do this.

I shrug. "Not too much. There's a few things I don't like, but I think I'm pretty well-adjusted. When I was a kid, my parents were the type to make me eat everything because hardcore Catholic equals *rigid* so no way we're wasting anything. And I hated it back then, but I guess it gave me a broader palate as I got older."

"Eggplant is definitely an acquired taste, though." Cierra grins. "But your parents, are they planning to come visit you while you're here?"

I focus on my burrito. "No."

"Oh." She doesn't push it.

Gay. Catholic family. Parents who won't visit. A life story in seven words, and now I feel bad for probably killing the mood.

"They're missing out," she says.

"Yep." I'm over them, but—

"I guess I'm pretty lucky to be with you, then."

—how the fuck do I respond *that*?

Cierra takes the eggplant from my napkin and pops it into her mouth, a joking challenge on her face. I stick my tongue out at her. Her eyes crinkle into crescent moons and she snorts when she laughs and *oh*, I think, *this is how it ends*.

Cierra admits that, though she lived in Japan as a kid, and now at least a year, she doesn't have much initiative to go out on her own. So we explore Tokyo together, all the big sights: to the Imperial Palace, to Ginza, to Asakusa. She takes me to the art museums in Ueno Park, and we go up into the Sky Tree to gaze down on the ant-sized city sprawl and try to find each other's neighborhoods. We find out Odaiba is the most fun when it's raining. Every time we go into a department store, she has to run and look at the Copic markers, and spends hours testing out shades of colors with only minute differences. Her face scrunches up when she's concentrating, and I stand and watch her and listen, even though I don't get it, because it's so cute. She helps me compose poetry, throwing in random words as suggestions to make me laugh. Eventually we branch out, taking day trips to Yokohama's Chinatown, shrines in Kamakura, the beaches of Enoshima. Our outings aren't without their difficulties; we're plagued by misread

train schedules, lost belongings, bad weather, *horrible* weather—in the fall we go to Nikko just as the Japanese mainland is getting slammed by a typhoon, and we spend the weekend with dripping hair and flooded socks (but taking the best pictures of our lives).

In the early spring, we even book a trip out to Okinawa for a few days, figuring that going during the tourist off-season would be more enjoyable. We use the cheapest airline we can find and wait for our flight in the shittiest terminal I've ever seen. Cierra buys some rice balls from a kiosk, which are just awful. The rice crunches in our teeth and the tuna sticks in the back of my throat like dry cereal, and she laughs and promises we'll get some actual good food when we land, but three hours later she's puking in a Naha Airport public toilet. So instead of browsing shopping streets and sampling traditional Ryukyuan cuisine our first night in Naha, a city so beautiful it's unfair, we sprawl on the pull-out couch at our Airbnb watching Netflix, drinking ginger tea, and eating saltine crackers and beef bowls bought for cheap at the convenience store nearby. The real you-get-what-you-pay-for experience.

Still, we have fun.

That's the thing about being with her.

The Skyliner, of course, arrives *right* at 1:27.

Cierra helps me haul all three suitcases onto the train and up into the luggage rack. Adam/Avery/Aaron fucks off to another car, thankfully. The arm I twisted is still sore, but the interior of the train is blissfully cool, and my legs don't meld with the cloth seats like they did the chairs in the waiting room, so it's heaven for all I care.

It's only about thirty or forty minutes from Nippori Station to the Narita International Terminal. Now that I'm out of the heat resting a bit, the only thing I can focus on is the counting down of minutes, which soon is going to turn into the counting down of months, to days, to hours.

I tighten my fingers, threaded through Cierra's.

As though reading my mind, she whispers, "It's only until December. I only have to go home for Christmas, and I'll spend the entire rest of the break with you. Hang in there."

"I know."

I think about home, briefly. Cierra's not there, but my parents are. It's hardly a fair trade.

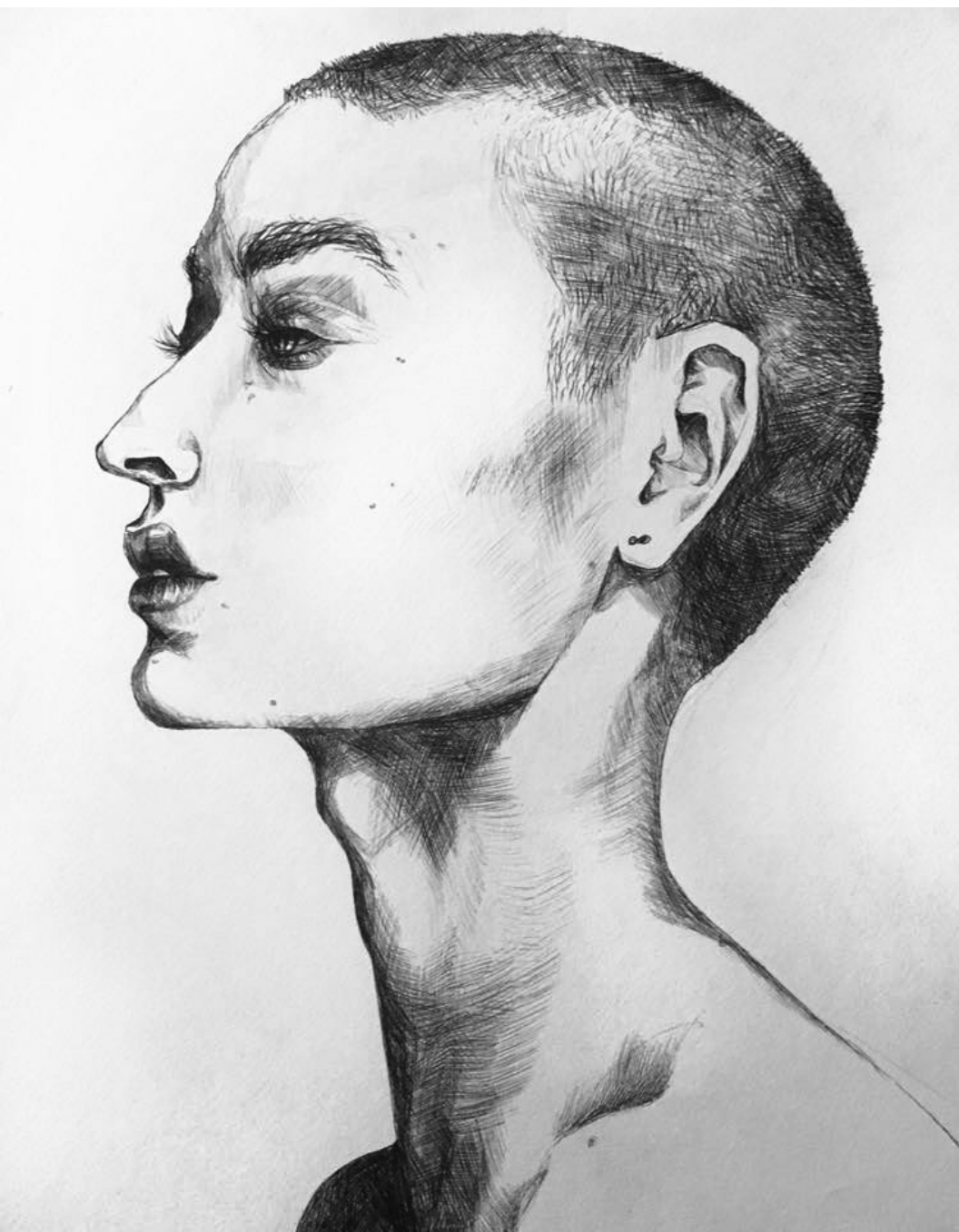
"I'm aware that it's a huge loss," she says. "I don't know what you're going to do without me. I am irreplaceable."

"Effervescent," I reply.

"A real gift to humanity."

"I'm not sharing you with the rest of humanity."

I see her smile out of the corner of my eye.



DEEP BURN BLUE

Erin Sargent

Deep Burn Blue

I pull the car over
In the angle parking off Main
We sit there

Together
Rain falling on the sunroof above us
I ask you where you see yourself in five
years
You say married,
With two kids,
A dog,
A backyard across from your mother

When you ask me,
I say New York,
Writing for something,
Scraping by,
I say that I want the city to break me down
So that I am forced to pick up the pieces
I say that I really want to feel something

And I don't have to look up
To know I need to ease you,
I mean that I need to feel something for
myself

We make out like teenagers
Sloppy
In the back seat of my car
Our shirts and my white bra

Thrown to the side

The cold November air
Seeps through glass,
Foggy windows and

Breathless,
I press my nipples to your chest
Hard,
They drag across your skin
Warm in this cold car

It's fickle,
These taboo moments
Hidden in this city

The rain reflects downtown lights:
The little bulbs
Strung through trees
At trendy cafes
And neon signs at the parking garage
You know I like the colors on the streets
In the rain

There's no future
Where we are together
We both know that it's true

But here, in this car,
In the angle parking off Main,
Neither of us needs to say it

FROSTBITE

Michelle DeCelles Schenk

We surrender into shelters and wait, warding off his icy fingers with fires, furnaces, and electric baseboards, keeping a barrier between our skin and his touch with layers of fleece, cotton, and wool. Sometimes it's not enough. On the darkest days, Death himself hovers in our frozen breath as we exhale. He's touched us once and always wants more. Once the heat returns, we're reminded of our carelessness; he leaves his mark, burning skin that flares with pain, swells, and oozes.

My great-grandfather, Thomas August DeCelles, told this story to my father and uncles on a moonlit, bitter-cold night, his voice not unlike snaps of split wood and crackling sparks. He spoke in short sentences, always breathless by his last syllable. "Replacing the salt lick and breaking up ice, I happened to look up. I noticed the sky. How it looks before the snow. Way the sky feels so low, like it's standing right next to you. The air, it warmed up a few degrees. Light looked different. Sun filtered through gauze. Land, real quiet. I had to get those horses. Get them to the barn. It's only maybe an eighth of a mile. Up there, where the old bunkhouse sits, huh?"

My father, eight years old, and his younger brothers nodded, knowing where the bunkhouse was. Where the old barn was.

Great Grandpa continued, sure they understood this short distance. "Blizzard come up while I was getting them inside. I started back. I couldn't see. Not where I was going or where I'd come from, nothing. They call it a whiteout. I was snow-blind. I wandered in one direction long enough to know I should've reached the house. Then I went east for a while, thinking I was off, just a bit. Boy, I was getting just scared. I couldn't feel my feet or my fingers. Then, comes this light. I could just make it out. It neared, an old man with a lantern, his breath white, calling me in my mother's language. An old Indin man," Great Grandpa closed his eyes and nodded, "he showed me home. He showed me home, then just disappeared."

At first, it's simply cold skin, then it pricks us, then it's numbness. We may not even realize we're bit until someone points it out. It was my mother who constantly pointed to the lack of sensation and numbness that severely affected my father. Raking and probing all his oozing blisters. Necrosis—the death of tissue—begins in prolonged exposure to damp, unsanitary or cold conditions. In extreme cold, blood vessels constrict. Blood is diverted from extremities. Cells within the dermis and subcutaneous tissue form ice-crystals, bursting and leaking fluid and proteins into tissue, causing blisters. Skin turns from red to white. Pale and hard, it becomes numb to pain until finally, black, leather-hard skin reveals the severe damage of the deep tissue.

Once the feet are frozen, they must stay frozen if one is to continue walking through such environments. Thawed feet are more vulnerable to damage. Sometimes the only treatment is amputation or debridement, a severing of this dead, infected tissue.

After returning from Vietnam, my dad brought my mom home to the reservation. Here they had land, and the agency hospital, where my mom delivered me and my two brothers. We lived in my great-grandparents' cabin, the oldest on the Fort Belknap Reservation, until my dad built a house of our own, three miles up the hill, atop a buffalo jump.

An early snowfall of 1978 dumped day and night. Nobody was prepared. After two days of shoveling out his pickup, Dad knew we needed a snowmobile. The tribe plowed a path to our house from the highway. Dad traded a calf for a '76 John Deere. He had to get hay to the cows and groceries and supplies for the family. My dad was on constant watch for the horses. Ten or twelve head, some still wild, grazed far up in the hills, always returning each fall. My grandpa Gus's Arabian racehorse was the stud for the little palomino foal my father loved. After rigging up an old car hood to the back of the snowmobile, he brought hay to the cattle, then set out looking for the horses. Ice formed on his eyelashes, his facemask stiff, frozen from his breath. Squinting against the bright snow, he tried to find signs of the herd. The snow flew horizontally, heavy and fast, the temperature plummeted, forty below zero, the wind blew fifty miles per hour. His search proved useless. He shivered intensely; his teeth slammed against each other like pistons. Every muscle tensed; his spine screamed. He returned home defeated. Wrapped in piles of blankets, he shook through the night.

A short break in the weather, Dad loaded up the family. Worried we'd be snowed in, he took us to the old cabin near the highway while he went into town. Returning, he parked his pickup, unloaded the groceries along with my brother, mom, and me onto the old rust-red car hood chained to the snowmobile. He towed us home, uphill through roofless tunnels of snow, each wall taller than Dad.

Dad set out again in search of the horses. He followed their tracks down to Joe Springs. Maybe they'd been trapped in the blizzard and finally made it down in search of water. Joe Springs was frozen over. The herd was there. He walked slowly to the foals, every young colt and filly dead, frozen on the ground, his little palomino lifeless. He rounded the rest and brought them to the barn. He gave them water, hay, and blankets, but knew at least two more weren't going to make it. He screamed across the plains. Where was the old man and his lantern now? He'd lost those horses, the daughters and granddaughters of our ancestor's herd. Descendants of French Gus DeCelles' string of racehorses and his famous white colt, Enchant, who'd won so many purses on the circuit at the turn of the century. The grandchildren of the wild mustang that came to my long-ago Gros Ventre grandfather, Black Dog. He'd lost those goddamn horses, he wept. He left us. For days. He got drunk. Long-term numbness persisted. He was never truly warm again.

CARNIVORE

Shelby Metz

I want to take you apart. To rip the very flesh from your bones. To make garlands from your entrails and handbags from your kidneys. I want to take you by the hand and lead you into my den of horrors. I want to sip on a gallon of your blood as your lungs collapse. To listen to the wet gurgle of your screams through the slit in your throat. To pop your stomach like a balloon and let the acid burn a path to your spine. I want to catch your tears in a jar and keep them on a shelf with your name. To dig my fingers into your eyes until my nails hit your skull. But they've got me locked up in a cage, love. I've got a life sentence on my head and tomorrow is my execution.

I want

A last meal of your still beating heart on a platter made of gold.



FAMILIAR HAUNTS

Tait Vigesaa

The house goes for under market value because the previous owner thinks it's haunted. She's right. I grow up there playing Super Nintendo in an attic that for some reason locks from the outside. We adopt a Chow named Zakita that my dad calls Cujo. I never see anything too weird. Just a ball that rolls uphill against the slant of the house. Or shadows caught out of the corner of my eye. Or my younger brother walking through the kitchen outside of our bedroom and the silverware flying open and hitting him in the side. We both run upstairs yelling. We say it's the ghosts. Dad says it's the air-conditioning.

My parents drop me and my brothers off at our grandmother's house on some weekends. We get ice cream at Softies and then she takes us to Barnes & Noble or the library. I find a bargain book with a black cover that's just a door with a wispy hand peeking around to open it. It's a book about urban legends and ghost stories. She won't buy it for me. I beg and plead and promise that I'm old enough to read it. A rite of passage building to the point I'll be able to look down the dark hallway to the room filled with antiques.

I'm sharing a bed with my younger brother but I can't sleep. Spring-heeled Jack is waiting outside the cracked open door, peeking in with the light. The Mothman is probably peering in from the window. I want to turn on the light but I keep picturing the illustration of the Jersey Devil waiting in the dark by the light switch. In the morning my grandmother takes the book away.

The drummer in my band has spirits. His family has done their homework (fucked around with a Ouija board). They find out there's three of them. There's the two good spirits who are little girls and they want to protect Colton's dad, Dale. Then there's one evil spirit. They call him The Tall Man. He's older and has a smell. He wants to hurt Dale. Some of the other guys laugh and are skeptical. I tell him I believe him. That I've felt cold things in the basement.

My first home away from my parents is one I'm renting with several friends. I lied about an aunt so I didn't have to stay in the dorms. Among my possessions is a human skull my great-grandfather found in a field. Robby asks to keep it in his room one night. He brings it to me at the kitchen table in the middle of the night. He's shaking his head and looking at it with wide eyes. I can't quite tell if he's awake or not.

Zach's girlfriend cheats on him so she's out and off the lease. Jeff

sleeps with my girlfriend so he gets kicked out too. Rooms move around, Zach takes the larger room and we look for someone to take Jeff's room. Sean moves in and he trashes the house over Christmas break. He goes home from college and Chris moves in. After two years the walls are caked with bad psychic energy, or at least that's what Meredith says.

I'm home for a little bit, staying with my parents. My mom's worse off after back surgery and dealing with her medication load for schizoaffective disorder. We're sitting on the back porch smoking cigarettes. The backyard is a mess of snow and unraked leaves, dirty wet piles of interseasonal procrastination. My mom turns to me and asks, "What did he say to you?" and I ask her who and she responds and says, "The man whispering in your ear." The little girl playing under the bed and the man who whispers used to scare me. Now they just make me worry.

There're some phone calls where you just know somehow about the whirlwind of fuck on the other end before you even answer. The earth-quivering moments where you lose the ability to stand for a minute. Your knees buckle. And you don't feel the sharp rocks in the gravel driveway cut holes in your jeans to slice at your legs. Everything will sound tiny and far away on the phone call. The sound of your father's voice will sound like someone else with a pitch and tone like you've never heard your entire life. Someone will drive you somewhere and you won't really remember where you were going. But you'll remember the pine trees in the valley north of your home and the way they looked blurring together through tears and motion while you leave yourself because you know it's the first time but won't be the last.

THREE AND A HALF BLOCKS

Grace Held

“It’s really coming down out there, isn’t it?”

The plate was already clean, but her soapy, cloth-covered hand kept circling it, slowly. It was the last dish. Once it was dry, she would be done.

“Maybe we should head out now, before it gets worse.”

An inaudible sigh. She placed the dish on the drying towel beside the sink, then turned her back to it. He stood on the other side of the room before the window, a dark silhouette against the thick white snow that fell on the other side of the glass. The cold of it could be felt even over the heated room.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she finally said.

He turned his head in her direction, begging for an explanation. Brown eyes followed her fumbling hands as she dried the remaining droplets on her dark blue jeans, clumsily clambering for her cell phone in her back pocket.

“It’s only eight,” she said, glimpsing at her cracked screen. “There’s no need to rush. Besides,” she continued, “the snow’s supposed to stop soon, anyway.” She opened her weather app to confirm, but got lost in her lists of cities whose forecasts, as of now, did not matter.

When she looked up again, he was fully facing her, his back against the window, his arms crossed over his chest. He wanted to say something, she knew he did, but he wouldn’t. Jonah was notorious for that. There was something in his eyes that carefully bore into hers. Sadness, maybe frustration. Most likely both.

“Fine,” he answered after a while. He pushed off the wall and started across the room. “I’ll go take a shower, then.”

“Jonah—”

“It’s fine, El,” he continued, passing her. “We’ll head out after I get out. The snow should be done by then, right?”

“Your hair will freeze again.” Her voice was becoming desperate. She wished she would have just agreed.

“I’ll wear a hat.” He said that every time.

The bathroom door shut loudly behind him, and while she tried to convince herself it was accidental, she wasn’t sure. The apartment was silent for a couple of long, dreadful moments, before the sound of the starting shower washed it away.

She exhaled.

Her lungs forgot how to function in that moment, but her heart seemed to be working overtime, purposefully pumping blood everywhere from her overthinking brain to her trembling fingertips that tenaciously grasped the little black box. Opened.

Their spare room that was not long ago filled to the brim with oversized boxes, now only held one small enough to fit in her jacket pocket. Still, she had never felt more claustrophobic in her life.

From the other room, she heard the shower water come to an abrupt stop. She snapped the velvet box shut, ignoring the blinding gleam of the diamond within its miniscule walls. Ellie placed it back into the drawer where she found it and hurried out of the small room, only moments before Jonah emerged from the bathroom.

"Would you look at that." The towel around his waist was briefly adjusted, his wet hair almost reaching his shoulders.

Ellie couldn't bring herself to look away. It was as though he was at the end of a long, dark hallway, as if they were not even in the same room. She scratched at her second finger behind her back.

"I guess you were right."

She was confused for a moment, following his gaze over to the foggy window. It had stopped snowing.

She didn't know if she wanted to be right.

He didn't wear a hat. Had the circumstances been different, she would have pointed this out to him, playfully scolding him, reminding him that it was the best way to catch a cold even though the entire time they had been together, Jonah had never been sick. She said nothing.

They walked in silence for a while, and instead of attempting to decipher her thoughts, Ellie focused on her footsteps. Snow covered the ground, thick as a white down comforter that was likely in a storage unit in central Europe by now. Cotton-like. She didn't know how Jonah could stand it, but he always preferred his walks in freshly fallen snow. *Melt*, she willed it. *Let me be comfortable*.

Any further than their footsteps, there was silence. In this world of pure winter, it was just the two of them—there was nothing beyond the snow-covered street in front of them, no one in the small, dark houses that lined it. A year, maybe even a month before, this would have been all they wanted, a timeless world all to themselves, where the stress of the days before and the days to come were buried deep beneath the ice and snow. Instead, she found herself counting down the blocks. One down, three to go.

Almost complete silence. They had not spoken since they left the apartment, but unlike countless times before, this was not a silence that

either of them was comfortable with.

"This feels off," Jonah finally said, breaking the silence. He must have thought that saying the obvious would make it less true in a way, but he was wrong. "Everything about this right now is weird."

"It doesn't have to be," Ellie answered, only because she didn't know what else to say.

Jonah looked over at her for the first time that walk. "You can't make it normal, Ellie." She knew that, of course—but it hurt hearing it from him. "It's not like before. It never will be."

Almost-silence overtook them again, broken only by their footsteps, slightly out of sync. Her eyes did not leave her feet, treading carefully, knowing that there was a thick layer of ice hiding beneath the snow. Two blocks.

They didn't try to talk to each other for a while after that. Neither of them wanted to confront what would happen the next day, or what might have happened if things had turned out differently. Most of all, they didn't want to confront what was happening now—the distance growing between them on a walk they knew more than any other. Glove-covered hands intertwined with one another were replaced with cold hands in coat pockets. A loving photograph being slowly ripped in two. Three blocks.

Ellie looked up sharply at the distant sound of a cackling laughter. It was faded, almost echoing, but it was there nonetheless. It had to be ahead of them—that was about all she could tell. She looked up and squinted into the snow-covered street, but found nothing. In that brief moment, all awkwardness between her and Jonah went to the back of her mind. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" he answered, as if he were pulled from deep thoughts. He looked up and over to her in one solid motion.

"Someone was laughing," Ellie told him, still trying to find the source of the noise. "Did you hear it?"

Jonah, too, put the awkwardness behind him for a moment. "No," he replied, but he knew that his answer was not what she was looking for. He reached for her hand. "It was probably from one of the houses. People are still up, it's not even ten yet." As she looked at him, he squeezed her hand, a reassuring smile across his lips. "There's nothing to worry about."

She nodded, allowing herself to be pulled closer to him. For a moment, things felt normal.

Half a block to go. Ellie and Jonah walked briskly together, their hands still connected, but not as tightly as before. Three and a half blocks.

The air shifted. Ellie stopped abruptly and turned to look over her shoulder. It had felt as though someone had walked past her, their shoulder almost brushing hers, but looking behind her, she found no one. She and Jonah were completely alone out there in the freshly fallen snow.

"You alright, Ellie?"

Ellie watched the corner, as if by doing so, she'd find the nonexistent

figure that had nearly walked into her. "Yeah," she said. She turned to look at Jonah, giving him a soft smile. "I'm okay."

He squeezed her hand again, and this time, she squeezed back. They walked together through the untouched snow.

"Eloise fucking Fitzpatrick, how dare you leave us."

They had barely gotten the chance to close the door before Ben, a close friend of theirs from the beginning of college, wrapped his arms around both of them. The half-empty wine glass in his left hand nearly spilled onto Ellie's jacket, but he was somehow able to control it. Ben had an amazing sense of balance, even when he was drunk.

"Oh, no need to make her feel bad," came a soft voice from within the house. Margo came from the kitchen, three glasses filled nearly to the brim with red wine balanced in her two hands. Even sober, she could not balance nearly as well as her husband. Red droplets splashed onto the hardwood floor. "We're celebrating."

Ellie glanced over to Jonah, but he was too focused on getting the packed snow off of his boots.

"It's all happened so fast, hasn't it?" Margo started, minutes later. The four of them sat around the small living room with their wineglasses, as they had done countless times before. But, like the walk over here, it felt off. This would be the last time.

She nodded, taking a small sip of her wine. "I got the job only a month ago, and I'm already about to leave."

"Austria," Margo said in genuine awe. Ellie knew she had always wanted to travel the world, but was much too afraid to.

"What language do they speak in Vienna? Austrian?" Ben asked.

"No, they speak German over there," answered Jonah.

Ellie watched as he placed his glass on the coffee table and turned to Ben. They started their own conversation, lamenting about the German class the two of them were in their first year. Ellie took another sip of the bitter wine.

"Why don't I fill you up, El?" came Margo.

Ellie looked over to her with a bit of confusion—she had only drunk half of her glass—but could quickly tell that that was not Margo's true intention. She followed her into the kitchen.

As soon as they were around the corner, Margo wrapped her arms around her friend.

"Something's not right between you and Jonah," she observed. Ellie was taken aback. Margo was normally oblivious to that kind of thing unless it was really bad, and she had hoped it wouldn't be that bad.

"I'm moving halfway across the world tomorrow."

"But that doesn't mean it's the end for you two. You've done long distance before."

"It's different this time," Ellie told her. "I don't know when, or even if I'll come back."

"But you love him, don't you?"

Ellie's heart sank. She looked down at her ring finger, imagining what it would be like to have a thin, tan line at the base of it, what it would be like to have a little extra weight on it. "More than anything," she answered.

"Then you guys will find a way to make it work," she finished. "I know you will."

Ellie took a deep breath, Margo's frail hand on her middle back, comforting her. She nodded, and began to follow her friend back into the living room.

To stay or to go. It was a decision she had already made, but every day, every second since making it, she had questioned it. Her dream job as a museum curator started in Vienna. She knew she couldn't pass it up. But she had a life here, a life with someone she loved more than the world itself. How could she be so selfish as to give that up?

"Can we talk for a moment, El?"

She looked into the brown eyes she would have to leave tomorrow. Margo continued into the living room as Jonah led Ellie back into the kitchen.

He took a shaky breath, as he finally came forth to say what he wanted to say. "I've been an asshole."

"No, Jonah—"

"Really, Ellie, I have." His eyes were cloudy. It broke Ellie's heart to watch him like that. "It's your last day here, and all I've done was think about what it'd be like when you're gone instead of being with you while you're still here. You don't deserve that."

Tears welled in her own eyes as she latched onto him, holding him tighter than she had ever held him before. He returned it. "I can't bear the idea of leaving you," she cried into the shirt she had bought him.

She wondered what would have happened if he had knelt down before her then and pulled out that little, black box. She wondered what she would say.

Hours later, Ellie said her goodbyes to Ben and Margo. As she and Jonah walked down their driveway, Jonah squeezed her hand. "No more tears tonight." He wiped away the single droplet. "We made a promise."

Ellie smiled. That was four glasses of wine ago. She interlocked their pinkies, as they had done when they made that promise, and smiled at him. "No more tears tonight."

At the end of their driveway, the two of them turned, and walked back the way they came. "Hey look," Ellie said, pointing to the lone footprints on the sidewalk. "We made those."

Jonah grinned, letting go of her hand. She watched him curiously as

he found his past footprints and began retracing them, walking clumsily backward. Ellie let out a cackling laugh when he nearly slipped. Jonah was just happy he could make her smile again.

She grabbed his hand tightly and pulled him into her, briefly kissing his cold lips, then each of his cheeks. "You didn't wear a hat," she commented.

"Guess my hair's gonna freeze." He smiled.

They walked together, hand in hand, walking alongside the footsteps of their past selves. Ellie tried her hardest to keep her mind on the past, knowing that if she thought about the future, even about the next twelve hours, she would dissolve into silence again.

She nuzzled her hair into Jonah's shoulder and whispered softly, "I love you."

"I know," he answered. "I love you, too."

They were hardly half a block away from Ben and Margo's when she saw them. Two dark figures, loosely holding hands, walking in almost complete silence. *Hey*, she wanted to tell them. *Don't think about it. Be together, and don't think about what's ahead of you.*

They walked past each other, Ellie's shoulder nearly bumping into the stranger's. She stopped and turned her head in their direction, watching their retreating figures. She almost recognized them.

"You alright, Ellie?"

Slowly, her head cleared. She knew those retreating figures, and she pitied them. They would have to see the morning light. They would have to say goodbye.

"Yeah," she said. She turned to look at Jonah, giving him a soft smile. "I'm okay."

He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back. They walked together through the untouched snow.



TO FEEL BETTER

Savannah Woods

My tongue latched to the roof of my mouth. My throat muscles worked in protest. No, no, no. I closed my eyes and tried to think of anything but the nine orange tabs of hell in my palm. I had to do this. In the soft light of my dorm room, I watched myself in my scratched, refracted mirror. She wasn't me—*no, no, no*—but my jaw clenched like I was about to down something foul, piss-soaked, rotten. Possessed, I threw the sweet pills onto my dry tongue, swallowed, swallowed the last one that caught in the back of my throat, gagged and shuddered. I grabbed my Hydro Flask but my stomach was so swollen that anything more than a baby sip threatened to rip me open.

Dulcolax pills are roughly the size and shape of dried arborio rice. The trick is to swallow eight or ten of them so fast the sweet orange coating doesn't dissolve and make you gag. It's better with water, but sometimes that's a luxury I didn't ration for. On the label of Dulcolax, it specifies use "for temporary relief of occasional constipation and irregularity" and it "produces bowel movement in 6 to 12 hours." The main ingredient, bisacodyl, is known as a stimulant laxative. This means it's bad for your body.

The sweet, sickly taste of the pills persisted; it repulsed me. I quickly dug under my bed for something to make my mouth more palatable. The plastic wrappers of sugar-free mints, LifeSavers, and cinnamon Trident gum sifted through my fingers. My earlier promise to not binge and purge had left me empty of my coping calories—sometimes if I didn't have supplies to fall back on, I didn't do it. I found one piece of old, dusty gum, brushed off the dirt, and crammed the stick in.

I looked outside, wringing my hands. Winter held Missoula with icy breath. Below, the parking lot was covered in snow and ice, and the trees looked like black spider legs. It was too cold to walk. My fingers rubbed my collarbones as the sweetness continued to nettle my sanity. Maybe I had accidentally thrown some wrapped mints in the trash.

There is no way to pleasantly or politely describe laxative abuse. It hurts. It's gross. And it's humiliating. Nights become brutal, throat-choking, bitter, stinky nightmares. You lay in your bed and you fart rancid, horrible, bowel-crushing farts and you think *is the feeling of thinness really worth it?* For months on end, I'd jolt awake to cramps, urges, and a gurgling under the bottom of my left ribs. I held my breath when the cramps paralyzed me. Groggy and half blind, I waddled and hunched and sometimes crawled my way to the bathroom, sat on the toilet, and hoped

that none of my residents would stumble in on their RA shitting her brains out. “Food poisoning,” I planned to explain to them if I was caught. “Something I ate,” or “I’m never having the chicken strips again.”

I got down on my knees. The trash was wet. I’d dumped coffee and juice over my leftover binge food: a ham sandwich, two chewed and spit-out chocolate bars, one half-eaten bran muffin, a full salami panini, the cores of two apples, a mashed banana, and the crumbles of a giant, size-of-my-head chocolate chip cookie. It smelled sugary and warm and gross. Normally, I tossed hair from my hairbrush and swept my floor to throw dust on it. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes, I’d just dig through it until I found a clean enough piece and continue gnawing.

I stared at the mush and wetness, breathed in the fumes. The urge to eat filled my every nerve. I knew if I stuck my hand down there, my self-respect and decency would disintegrate with the crumbly feel of warm chocolate. I shot up, undid the trash bag and sprinted to the 9th floor trash chute. I felt bad throwing it down—residents on the lower floors complained—but nothing else would truly stop me.

I curled up on my black futon, thinking about what I could do. I finished my Dulcolax bottle and I needed more mints. My dependency on the pills had been gradual; I’d been using them every few days by sophomore year. Now, by the beginning of spring semester, I was going through a 200-pill bottle every two weeks. On nights the bottle was empty, I walked to the 24-hour Albertsons across the frozen Clark Fork River. Walking burned calories, and when I went at night the soft lights of the bridge and chilly air reminded me of good times.

Tonight though, I couldn’t muster up the energy. As I lay huge and full of loathing, I remembered I kept my medicine basket under my futon. I took out the Tums and chewed 7 antacids. They weren’t as tasty or sharp as the mints or gum, but they filled my mouth with chalky sweetness that masked the pills’ rancid leftovers. I drifted off to sleep, trying to adjust so my stomach didn’t hurt.

Nobody told me that the tendency to starve—but not starve too much—and to binge—but not binge too much—and to purge—but not purge too much—was severe enough. I thought I wasn’t good enough for true anorexia or bulimia; I wasn’t controlling enough, serious enough. At this point, I didn’t know how to throw up (though I’d tried on numerous occasions), so I logically did the next best thing. I knew that laxatives didn’t undo my binges, but they made me feel better. I’d programmed my mind to associate anger with wanting food, with hunger as some terrible admission that I had a body with human needs. I never lost massive amounts of weight, and I didn’t gain large amounts either. I labored to self-improve by destroying my body. The more I ate, the more I needed to compensate. The longer I fasted, the more I loved myself. I would look at the pictures of emaciated

women and think, “I’d like to have anorexia, but not like her.” Something about those skinny, bony, horrifying-looking women both scared me and infuriated me. That was *too* skinny, too scary, too sick—why couldn’t I have *half* the discipline as her, why couldn’t I just starve and starve and starve until I got “okay” skinny? The skinny that looked healthy. My weight floated within an unnoticeable twenty pounds, but those twenty pounds sagged on my self-esteem. *How fucking unacceptable*, I thought. I wasn’t good enough; I wasn’t valid; I *sucked*. I lived in a world where neither spectrum accepted me, and I felt if only, if only I fit the diagnosis for one or the other then I could seek help. If only I was fucked up enough, someone could cure me.

I woke several hours later to rolling, searing cramps. The back of my neck and behind my ears broke into a sweat. The slogan on Dulcolax is “Gentle, dependable constipation relief,” and if that isn’t the fattest lie in the advertising industry, I don’t know what is. Amazon reviewers claim that it’s “An Exorcism for the Stomach!!” or “Food poisoning couldn’t be worse,” or “Only a masochist would label this pill ‘gentle.’” The pain is unbearable, like freezing knives grabbing the ends of my intestines and trying to make them pirouette. But it got the job done: I felt thinner, empty, lighter. I was addicted to that feeling of being empty, weightless.

But something was wrong this time. The pain was there, but there was a sour, dry taste in the back of my throat. I burped. Tangy. And then I remembered: antacids are a bad mixture with Dulcolax. The bottle warns that one should avoid milk or antacids within an hour of taking them. Normally I had been fine. Nothing happened when I binged on ice cream and sugary cereal with milk right before. This time it felt different: more sour, more gut-wrenching, like improperly dissolved pills churning in acid, wet chemicals gurgling up my throat.

Panic set in. I rubbed my jaw and neck—it still felt the same. *Had I fucked myself up truly this time?* I burped an acidic burp. *Who could I call? Should I go into the emergency room? They would laugh at me.*

Mom wouldn’t laugh, but what happened over break was too recent. Going home to Helena had been a living nightmare. To remove myself from the temptation of food and bingeing, I left my wallet and walked the mile-and-a-half to Helena’s downtown. I distracted myself for hours in The Mercantile or Murry’s Café. “Savannah,” my sister complained, home from her first college semester at Westminster, “Why are you gone all the time? It’s not fun and it’s weird.” I couldn’t tell her the Honey Nut Cheerios dug daggers into my head, the forbidden cookies and pies sang to my sick mind. It was easier to remove myself, to physically lock myself away, hole up, cower. I couldn’t trust myself.

By Christmas Day, my head ached and my iron will had fractured and my legs were achy and cold from the miles I walked. I made it through lunch and dinner with “normal” portions, but my body raged for more. It was our celebratory Indian Christmas dinner, full of rare, delicious foods

that I craved. One more soft, salty, fried Indian *puri*. *Just one*, I thought, *when will I have puris again?* As my family and I took turns clearing the table and cleaning up, I grabbed another *puri*, snuck into the bathroom, and shoved it down my throat. It was dry and tasteless and horrible, but my stomach demanded the pain. It demanded fullness, because who knew how long it would be until I gave it food again. *Fill me, Savannah*, it seemed to ache. *Fill me, please*. Soon roll after roll went down, and I determined that this required another fast. This one would be seventy-two hours. Three days. Or maybe as long as I could go.

But the fried bread weighed like bricks in my stomach. Round, wet, doughy bricks. The feeling itched through me. I went to the basement and dug through my suitcase, hoping that I hadn't done what I'd thought I'd done and used the last of my stash. I had.

"I'm going to Walgreens," I said, clinging to my keys and walking swiftly to the kitchen door that led to the garage.

"Why?" my mother asked. Soft Christmas lights haloed her head. The soft murmurs of the TV in the living room supplemented my sister's laugh. "It's too snowy out there."

"I'm going," I said, hopping from one foot to the other. "I need to go."

I don't remember how she convinced me, but somehow I let my mother take me gently by my hand and sit me down at the kitchen table. My hands wrung tightly, fingers picking at my fat, and my legs trembled and I needed, needed to go get the thing that would make me feel better.

"Why," she pressured me, "Just why?" My mother has soft green eyes and she's the cutest, most happiest, most understanding person in my world. I knew I was hurting her, but my eating disorder always, always, always came first. Trying to fight against it was like swimming against a rip tide. Logically, I knew I was doing something bad, but I was too panicked and too tired and too blind and too anxious to see, let alone try, any other alternative. For the past few years, Mom had watched me try to swim harder, offering love and encouragement, but she couldn't do anything when the current yanked me back. I told her that I needed laxatives, right then, right now. She didn't blink. "You don't need them, Savannah, Christmas is a time for indulging. Everybody does it."

I begged, pleaded, vibrated. Not in the way I indulged, I tried to tell her. I was gluttonous, fat, unclean, my thighs puffing, fat growing and dimpling and protruding my stomach, and—*god*—I was so *ugly*. She gave in and drove me to Walgreens, speaking soft words of reason. The voice in my head shut her out. The parking lot was empty and blanketed with fresh snow. I got out and walked quickly ahead of her. Mom hung back, watching, almost as if she knew nothing could stop me. I felt ashamed purchasing laxatives, here, of all places, and at this time, so I grabbed a pink spiral journal to appear normal. The fluorescents hummed as I scanned the shelf for a generic brand of Dulcolax. The cashier rang up my purchases with the blank, haunted gaze of someone having to work on Christmas Day. I

couldn't speak to Mom on the way back; my heart hurt, and I cradled my purchases.

Mom's sad, green eyes were still too raw. No, I couldn't call her. Not at this time, not at this place. It came to me instantly. The bulletin on Brooks Street. "Community Medical Emergency Room," it said. "Nurse on Call. 24 hours." I don't know if it's still there. But I remembered it. I googled the number and called it, fingers gripping my hamstring tendons.

The nurse greeted me and asked me what was wrong. She didn't sound tired at two in the morning.

"I took laxatives with antacids. And my stomach hurts weirdly."

She asked me how many of each. I told her five and five. A more acceptable number.

"Why did you do that?"

Her question threw me off. I didn't have an answer. I just had to do it. "I don't know."

She asked again: "Why'd you do that?"

I didn't know what to say. My throat dried. Panic bubbled under my chest. I was more afraid of this woman knowing than I was of potentially damaging my stomach. I always knew how to hide my disorder, to hide the thousands of calories, to claim I'd forgotten to eat that day (and the day before that, and the day before that). I knew how to appear normal. But this was the first time a stranger had asked me: "Why do you do this?" *Why do you hurt yourself like this?* The brazen confrontation trapped me in my delusion.

Why did I do this? I knew it was stupid.

I asked, "Will I be okay?"

"Yes, I would think so. It's just a small reaction, but if the pain gets worse then you should go in. Do you know where St. Patrick's Hospital is?"

I quickly hung up. I paced. The urge seared my bowels and I went to the bathroom and felt better. On the toilet, I scrolled through my phone, bouncing my legs. My stomach felt less arid, less acidic. I knew I needed to start exercising the calories off; my legs were ready, but the task ahead of me loomed heavily. After ten minutes, I went to the west stairs of Jesse tower to begin. I settled on ten flights of stairs ten times. The air in the stairwell was cool, comforting. Outside, snow fell like falling stars in the orange lamplight.

I watched myself in the darkened windows. Step down, down, down. My dorm formed a right angle, and the stairs have windows facing inward. When I was on rounds with my RA duty partner, we used the windows to spy for parties: flashing lights, sardines of people, beer bottles on sills, an odd collection of fans facing outward. Now I wondered if those same residents could see me. Up and down like a crazed woman—hey, isn't that the RA?

Why did I do this to myself? I thought. My darkened form slid around corners, pausing ever so slightly to eye my baggy sweats and sweatshirt. It

hid my swollen body. I hit the bottom and raced back upward two steps at a time. My steps were labored and they echoed, and the stairwell became a plastic container that steamed with my overcooked breath.

I started crying on the fifth set, settling on the eleventh floor, out of breath and wanting to quit. *Crying burns calories*, I thought. Warm tears wet my face and hair, but my hands and nose were cold. I felt swollen with sadness and desperate to stop. But I couldn't quit. Something in me wouldn't let me. It was like a barrier: I knew it wasn't helping, I knew that I couldn't undo the calories, and I knew that laxatives would do nothing but make me feel better. Yet giving up felt like a nightmare worse than Dulcolax-flavored ice cream.

Only now can I retrospectively diagnose myself: I had "Another Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder," according to the new and improved 2013 *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition. But I didn't know that. And I still don't know why.

When I was young, my self-awareness of my body came gradually, forming a hypersensitivity to how I appeared and related to those around me. I didn't pursue any activities that put an overwhelming focus on my body. I quit ballet and tap dance long before I determined that bodies could be ugly and fat. I played basketball and volleyball for many years, and both sports encouraged a strong, healthy body. Yet, I can pinpoint the moment when I decided I was fat: I was eight, puffing out my baby tummy in the mirror. I didn't care that I could outrun my sister and play tackle football as well as my brother. I started to feel unhappy with the way I looked.

My eating disorder truly started after I left my student exchange in India. It was 2013, and I was seventeen and stuck in a room with four walls and no one to talk to. I craved home and some semblance of love, and I sought all-American peanut butter by the spoonfuls, spooning away my insecurity and the taste of weird vegetables and the feeling of being sedentary. All I wanted to do was run, walk, play ball. I ballooned up with puffy cheeks and thick thighs in a foreign country where everyone around me was stick-thin. When I came home, I looked at the knobby knees of my sister, the razor-thin shoulder blades of my brother, and then to the pouch of my stomach. *One of these does not belong*, I thought.

The idea that I could actually change my body came from my dad. "You can count calories," he said, "if you're unhappy with your body and you think you need to lose weight. But you don't need to lose weight, Savannah, you're beautiful as you are."

I didn't feel beautiful; at that moment, seventeen-year-old Savannah felt lumpy and uncoordinated and fat. My dad's advice was a revelation. I know he was trying to help me, but neither one of us could have predicted the change it would have on me.

I embarked on my first diet ever. I downloaded MyFitnessPal. I counted calories. I counted mouthfuls. I counted teaspoons and tablespoons and cups. As the calories went down, so did the scale, and I started to feel lighter. I rubbed my hands over legs that became slimmer, over collarbones that appeared, over the ribs that stuck out.

When calorie counting failed me a year later, I felt angry that I couldn't just starve. Calories of food lingered in my head; it was too dangerous to just eat a 70-calorie egg. Better to just not eat at all. Then I wouldn't have to count it. My body begged for food. I tried to restrict even more.

I knew how to make myself feel better. My fingers became red pens, my eyes laser-focused on my deformities. My legs morphed into some hideous extension of me, my fingers the merciless probe that deemed life was not worth living with them as is. They scoured every bump, every flabby hold, every cellulite dimple and my nails wrote red lines of failure on my skin like an author editing his book. *No. Not good enough. What does this mean? Fat, lumbering legs. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Weak.* On my collarbones they wrote, *not sharp enough, not hollow enough, not deep enough.* On my stomach they critiqued, *too bulky, must trim, get to the muscle underneath.* On themselves they scratched, *where are the tendons, where are the hollows, where is the emotion?* I felt nothing for my reflection; I hated her.

My sophomore year, my urges broke free and I spiraled into bingeing and purging. Yet my eating disorder wasn't about control. . . but it was. It was about feeling better. It was about feeling okay in my body. Feeling okay with how I appeared to the world. In February 2018, I woke up with my head in the trash can and my sick slipping down the sides and my eyes bulging and my face hot and sweaty to realize that half-hearted efforts to recover just weren't doing it. So, I thought, I could throw up now. Was I a true bulimic yet? Would this make me feel better? All of this was to make me feel better. . . So why didn't I?

SMOKE FOR DIVINITY, YOU

Gill Ritchie

It's about talking about Hell—a layered shame, insolence
karmic inflation, swelling, heat.
circles in the desert

It's about seeking Heaven
like there are no words, chasing
salvation of Other and others.
chasing the dark
corners of the mind

L-ve means discernment
means I pick It, You in the end—in the every time

people are company and good company
is good thoughts and one thought and many
and L-ve and
I say to You, what a heart-wrenching surprise.
what a fucking astonishing universe.

the more we ask, the more we receive, always-
I choose Truth, a salve for open wounds.

the ghosts of our holy men kneeling in a pew
covered in blood and white linens, no repose
we ask to suffer with Christ, hands outstretched—
it feels good to suffer
“we are sinners”

G-d only knows
the shame of holiness,

far too easy to find that Hell can be comfortable.

—church, relaying something we know almost nothing about and
we read like a book and there is still good in the world
I fucking know it.

Coherence.
two sides of a coin

the L-ve you give in the dark is the L-ve you'll be reckoned with

THE TRAIL HOME

Pattie Wagner

Gray light filtered in through blue tent fabric, illuminating the woman as she slept through the brightening dawn. She reached her hand out of her sleeping bag, searching for the warmth of a familiar body, mouth crooked in a dream smile. Her eyelids fluttered against the pull of sleep.

“Mmm—” she murmured, her hand questing, finding nothing but the cold nylon of the tent floor. She opened her eyes fully as wakefulness found her, then, “—ah. Oh,” when she recognized the unoccupied half of the tent. She retracted her hand back into the warm cocoon of the sleeping bag. She zipped up the bag, all the way past her chin, and buried her face in the soft lining.

June squeezed her eyes shut and held her body as still as she could, trying to reclaim sleep and her half-remembered dream. The harder she tried to ignore them, the louder the campground birds seemed to get. A car door slammed somewhere nearby. The hungry rumble from her stomach was the last straw, and she threw back the sleeping bag with a groan. A spill of clothing spread out from a backpack near the tent entrance, T-shirts and socks splayed out carelessly. June picked up a faded, gray sweatshirt from the mess, brushed a bit of dirt off the collar, and pulled it over her head. She dug a little bit further down into the pile and pulled out two socks. They did not match, but she put them on anyway. That done, she tried to straighten up the chaos, but only succeeded in heaping her clothing over the tightly rolled inflatable mattress that kept her backpack propped upright. The mat sat next to a second sleeping bag, a twin of June’s own, but this one was still bundled neatly in its green sack. June looked at a bright yellow T-shirt near the bottom of the pile of clothes, pulled it out, and laid it over the packed-up sleeping bag. She slipped her mismatched feet into a pair of sandals that sat ready near the tent door and tugged her sweatpants until they covered her ankles. She ruffled her short blonde hair until it stuck up in the back, and yawned.

June unzipped the tent flap, unfolding herself into the morning light. She stretched her arms over her head, arching her back. Her mattress wasn’t quite thick enough to prevent sore muscles, especially after a few nights. She tilted her head to the side and groaned at the popping noise from her neck. She padded to her little car and removed the green Coleman stove from its backseat. Into the tin coffee pot went grounds and water, and soon the warm scent of brewing coffee was flowing freely through the trees. Eggs cracked and scrambled, bacon sizzled. June sat on the top

of the picnic table to eat her breakfast, her feet on the bench instead of the ground. The coffee tasted harsh, bitter and boiled, but she could feel the caffeine taking hold.

The couple in the campsite next to June's was up early as well. They looked good together, June thought as she watched them pack up their belongings. In fact, they looked like they stepped directly from an REI ad: both of them lean, fit, and wearing just the right amount of plaid flannel. The woman held what was probably an English muffin with jam on it in her mouth, leaving her hands free to pull up tent stakes. The man walked up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned, he reached toward the muffin hanging out of her mouth. She leaned back, out of his reach, but her eyes were laughing.

The couple had arrived on the same day June did, and she had watched them set up their tent, cook their meals, drink beer by their campfire. The man's name was Jonathan, she had decided that first night, staring into her own campfire, and the woman's was Betty. The campsites weren't close enough for her to have heard their real names. June thought up a happy life for the pair as she listened to them giggle their way through toasting marshmallows. Jonathan was considerate, but impulsive. Betty was the stable one. Betty was a dog person, but she would love the kitten Jonathan bought her as a birthday gift. They would bring their children to this campground, when they had them, and teach them to swim in the lake nearby. Each night, she got to know a little bit more about them, whether it was through their whispers in the campfire light or filling in the blanks of their lives herself. She knew them so well at this point that there was no need to even speak to them. Now she watched the two of them break down their tent poles over the rim of her mug. Jonathan glanced up and saw her looking. He waved, and she returned it, quickly dropping her eyes after. She wondered whether or not he brought Betty breakfast in bed. It seemed like something he would do.

Mark had brought her breakfast in bed once, on her twenty-ninth birthday, the year they had moved in together. She remembered his hands curled around the handles of the tray, the prim way he held his mug of tea, the way he sat beside her as she ate. She also remembered how his hands had moved after she was done, brushing aside the coverlet and tracing their way up her thigh. They had had to wash the leftover marmalade off the sheets that afternoon, a sticky orange film spread thin by their shifting bodies.

"Hey there!" a deep voice resonated through her head, scattering her thoughts. June started and almost dropped her mug in the dirt. "Ah, I'm sorry, didn't mean to scare you there. Just checking in," said the campground host as he neared her table. The host had white hair frizzed in a ring around his balding head, and his face looked like wrinkled leather, but he still walked tall and square-shouldered. He continued, "Was wondering if you were still expecting a second?"

"I," June started, "no. I'm not. It's just me."

"Ah, my mistake then. I thought you had registered for two. Wanted to make sure everything was okay."

June realized she must have written there would be two campers staying on the campground registration form instead of just herself out of habit. Betty wouldn't have made that mistake. Betty wouldn't be in this situation in the first place, either, she thought. "Oh, yes, I'm sorry," she said. "There was a change of plans at the last minute. I have some extra coffee if you would like, though. I always make too much."

"Much appreciated, young lady," said the host, producing an orange plastic travel mug. "Fill 'er up."

She did.

"You going out on the trail today?"

"I think so. Quartz Lake, probably. I did part of it yesterday and it was lovely."

"The overlook is worth it, if you want to do the whole trail. It's a bit of a climb there at the end, though."

"I saw that yesterday. I went about a third of the way up the mountain and turned back. I didn't bring enough water for that."

"Well, good luck and enjoy," the campground host said, sipping his coffee as he turned away. "You have bear spray, right? I don't like the thought of a little thing like you hiking alone, much less without spray. I'll lend you some if you need it, no problem."

"I have it, thank you," June replied. She was fairly certain her canister of bear spray still sat securely in Mark's car, still parked in front of their—his—house, but she couldn't admit to this smiling man that she had come here unprepared. Little lady my ass, she thought.

"Good, good, just doing my civic duty," said the campground host. He winked at her. "Have a good one."

"You too," she said and waved.

By the time June had cleared away her stove and remnants of her breakfast, Jonathan and Betty had already packed up and left in their Subaru. They had left a few sticks of firewood behind, and June gathered it up to add to her own pile. That done, she brushed her hands off and zipped herself back into her tent. She found her jeans where she had left them, crumpled by her sleeping bag instead of in the greater slump of laundry coming from her backpack. She put on a relatively clean T-shirt and her red windbreaker, tied her hair back under a bandanna, and exchanged her sandals for a pair of sturdy hiking boots. Also in the tent, next to where her boots had been, sat a larger pair of boots. They looked newer than hers, like they hadn't been broken in yet. June looked at them as she tied her bootlaces. She tried not to, but there they were. Loop a bit of cord around that metal hook right there, look at the boots. Tug the laces taut, look at the boots. Double knot, hey, look at those other boots still sitting right there. June narrowed her eyes at them, then picked them up and carried them

outside. She set them down underneath the nearest tree, upside down, then reached back and zipped the tent shut. She turned right out of her site and followed the curving, twisting road as it traced a path among the other campers and their collapsible weekend homes. The rest of the campground was mostly empty, she noticed, and realized with a small shock that it was Wednesday. She had been here since the previous Friday, and had paid her fee up through the maximum one-week stay. She didn't know what she would do when Friday came again. Mark certainly wouldn't be making her breakfast in bed again anytime soon. She supposed she would have to stay with her mother while she got back on her feet.

June had last spoken to her mother three weeks ago, when her world was still whole. Mom had asked her about her job (fine), the weather (fine) and, of course, Mark. "Have you two made any special plans?" she had asked. This was, of course, Mom-code for "Are you engaged yet?" June had rolled her eyes and looked over at her boyfriend, hoping to commiserate. He had been focused on his phone and didn't look up.

June remembered thinking she saw more of the top of his head, bent over that phone, than she saw of his face these days and replied, "No, mom. No special plans." Mom would get quite the surprise, then: June on her doorstep, unannounced and alone, smelling like a week of woods. Well, maybe that was all right. June's mother had introduced her to Mark after all. She could help clean up his mess.

June's footsteps led away from the temporary community of the campground. She followed the signs for Quartz Lake until she found a thin trail that hugged the edge of the clear lake by which the campground was built. It wound her along the shore for a half mile, then turned left between two hills that rose gently in the shadow of larger mountains. She breathed in a lungful of clear mountain air and felt the rhythm of her legs, muscles flexing, as she propelled herself along the path. The trees lining the trail stretched to the sky, branches reaching out to intertwine with the ones next to them, Spanish moss dripping from their tangles, shrouding the forest floor in shade and still. The trees were enormous, with thick, gnarled bark to protect their massive trunks. Here and there, lichen-covered boulders sat amid the trees, incongruous on the otherwise smooth ground. Mosses and ferns sprouted from the shattered trunks of long-fallen trees. They spilled out over the ground, blended one into the next, a thick, green mat that absorbed the sound of June's passage.

Her boots carried her on down the trail, her breath coming faster as she increased her pace. Twigs crunched dryly beneath her feet as she passed a section of fallen log, and she thought they sounded a little like bones snapping. Tiny little bones, she thought, and brought her foot down hard on the nearest bunch of sticks. A smile uncoiled across her lips. She thought again of Mark's hands clasping his mug of tea each morning, found another group of sticks and jumped on them, this time with both feet. They cracked loudly, the report echoing through the trees. Her smile

widened and she pushed her legs to move faster. She was practically jogging down the trail now, her small pack bouncing and thudding against her back. She jumped over a root sticking through the well-packed trail surface and focused on the thump-thump-thump of her feet on dirt. Her breath came in shallow gasps. The deep forest became a blur of green and gray as she sped through, hurdling roots and rebounding off the rounded rocks dotting the trail's smooth surface. Her brain was a whirl of white noise and green motion, her vision narrowed to the path in front of her.

As she hurtled along, she thought she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Her concentration broke and her left foot slipped through a slick of mud. She was still trying to see what had moved when her knees impacted the hard-packed surface. Her palms hit dirt a second later, and she cried out as gravel scored its way through her flesh. She lay stunned, the wind knocked out of her from her sudden stop. June caught sight of a deer bounding away down the trail, its white tail flipping gaily as it ran away from the intruder. *A deer. Only a deer. Venison, still on the hoof.* She tried to laugh, but all that came out was a breathless wheeze.

She rolled gingerly over onto her side and scooted off the trail, using her elbows instead of her hands to pull herself along. June turned her hands over to survey the damage. Tiny rock pieces dotted both palms and blood oozed around the edges of the holes they had made, but the worst of it was on her right hand. Three long furrows had been gouged across her palm, from the heel of her hand almost to the base of her fingers. A red pool was accumulating in the cup of that hand. June pulled the bandanna off of her head and wound it around her damaged skin, applying pressure. She let out a sob and wondered, for the first time, what in the fuck she was doing out here.

She had come home after work last Thursday to find her suitcase spayed out on their bed. Mark stood next to it, his spine straight, his face stern. She barely heard him speak, the flow of his words swallowed by the enormous, empty maw of her suitcase. He had rehearsed this, she thought as he spoke. How else could he sound this calm as he told her to pack her things? He hadn't even stumbled over the part where he told her to be out by the end of the night.

"Why, Mark?" Her voice sounded thin, reedy, small. "What did I do?"

"I just can't do this anymore. I'm tired of having the same fights, June. I'm done with it."

"Please don't do this. Please. We can work through this." She hated the begging whine she heard in her voice, but could not stop it. "Please," she whispered, her breath hitching as the enormity of the situation hit her.

Mark puffed out his cheeks in irritation and raked his hands through his dark hair. "If you wanted to fix our problems, you would have put some effort into it at some point over the past five years. I haven't seen that. I'm

done,” he repeated, then looked pointedly at her suitcase.

“If you want this over so much,” she mumbled through her tears and mostly to herself as she began to empty her dresser drawers, “why aren’t you the one packing?” She glanced at Mark and saw, oddly, fear in his eyes.

“It’s my house,” he said, a sulky tone in his voice. “I’ll help you move your furniture when you find a new place. I’m sorry.” He actually sounded sincere, she thought. She looked at his terrified eyes again and a horrible idea wormed its way into her brain.

“Is there someone else?” The silent, miserable look on his face gave her her answer, and she threw the handful of clothing she carried in his face. Mark flinched at the sudden attack. “You son of a bitch.” June leaned forward until she was inches from Mark’s nose, her teeth bared. He did not step away, but he didn’t meet her eyes either. “Big plans for tonight, then?”

“I—”

“Oh, go fuck yourself,” June spat.

Well. She didn’t have to worry about her bear spray anymore, she thought. She had made enough noise pulling gravel out of her wounded hands to alert anything within half a mile of her presence. If bears really avoided people who made noise, she thought she was good to go. Her wounds stung horribly, and she decided she would turn back instead of trying to reach the overlook today. She had pushed herself upright into a seated position and rested her back against a convenient rock while she cleaned her wound as best she could and rewrapped it. She was fairly certain she could stand, but wanted to take a quick rest before starting the walk back to camp. She wasn’t making good decisions, as her head-long dash into injury had shown, and relaxing by the campfire with a beer sounded better and better. She had emptied the fridge when she left her house—Mark’s house now, she had to get used to thinking of it that way—and looked forward to getting spectacularly drunk on her ex-boyfriend’s beer collection tonight. She dug into her pack gingerly, avoiding using her right hand as much as possible, and pulled out a pair of protein bars. As she ate, she thought she might not drink all of Mark’s beer after all. Maybe she would bring it back, hand it over to this new girl, if she was still there. June would tell her, “You’ll need this. Now excuse me while I get my shoes, which are probably still in the closet.”

She had also taken her camping supplies when she left. Her sleeping bag had made a satisfying thump when she’d thrown it out of the garage door and onto the driveway in front of her car. Mark had opened the door that connected the garage to the house and cleared his throat. June had her hiking pack in her hands, ready to throw that outside too, but turned and took aim at him instead.

Mark flinched, but June did not let go of the pack. “Are you taking the tent?” he asked.

June told him that she was, indeed, taking the tent. After all, she needed to make sure she would have a place to sleep while what's-her-name took over her bed.

He sighed. "Could you not take that right now? We can split everything up when we've had a chance to calm down."

June reiterated that the tent was coming with her, and if Mark did not like it, he could, in fact, come find her and take it. He knew where she'd be. He had not risen to the bait, but had instead walked out of the garage and away from her. She had watched his back retreat and flipped him a one-finger salute as he left. She looked at their dwindling stack of camping supplies, once neatly packed on the metal shelves along the wall, now scattered across the cement, the scent of long-extinguished campfires rising faintly into the garage air.

"Screw it," she said, and grabbed Mark's sleeping bag, self-inflating mattress, and brand-new hiking boots as well. Into the car they went, tucked between the tent and her suitcase. As she had driven out to the campground the next morning, her back stiff from the cheap motel mattress she had lain sleepless and red-eyed on until dawn that first night, she thought there was a chance he may come after his gear and find her along the way.

She had driven the entire way playing out different ways their reunion would go in her head. He would start by walking across her campsite, their eyes locked. He would apologize profusely to her (in some iterations, he even fell prostrate and sobbing at her feet), and they would weep together. No matter how it started, the scene always ended with the two of them wrapped in each other's arms, stumbling toward the tent, her hands tugging at his shirt and his teeth nipping her collarbone before they were even inside. They spent hours there in her mind, a tangle of limbs and lips, bodies intertwining over and over. June had spent the first two awful days looking up hopefully at every car that drove through the campground's gate, her heart in her throat, her hands fluttering at her navel. He had not appeared.

She brushed the crumbs from her protein bars off of her makeshift bandage and heaved herself to her feet. There would be no running on the trip back, June knew, and did not relish the thought of how sore she would be upon her return to camp. She pointed her boots back toward her tent and set off.

June rounded a bend in the trail. Stretched out before her was not more shady, old-growth forest, but a flattened column of trees, all pointed downhill in the direction of last winter's avalanche. She had been surprised the first time she passed this way and marveled at how the trees fell in such clean lines, dazzled with the sudden brightness of the sun when there was no canopy of branches to shade her. She had run through this

section of forest too quickly earlier to appreciate it, but on this return trip, June paused and looked out over the flattened woods. She was amazed to see there was a force powerful enough to level these huge trees so easily, and wondered what it would have been like to be here and see the snow roar in a white wall of destruction across her path.

She followed the curve of the trail as it left the devastated section of trees and was in shadow and still once more. Her hands hurt worse than ever, and now her knees were beginning to throb where they had fetched up against the dirt. June stepped to the side of the trail and placed her left hand flat on the smooth surface of a boulder, left on the hill by a long-retreated glacier. Another hiker had left a long stick wedged against the boulder, almost as tall as she was. She took a sip of her water and sucked in a deep breath. Her head leaned against the cool stone surface.

A flash of motion caught her eye again. This time, when she turned her head to follow it, she caught a glimpse of tawny, sleek fur. A mountain lion crouched on the opposite side of the trail from her, still as a windless August day and the color of dried-out grass before a fire. The big cat held itself low to the ground, tense, a coiled spring, waiting for her to run like the deer had. *I'm so stupid*, June had time to think, then their eyes met, green to blue, and June forgot how to breathe. Her heart gave a lurching thump, and she felt cold adrenaline surge its way through her body, her entire torso gripped tight in frozen terror.

The cat lashed its tail back and forth, and it lowered its head, preparing to strike now that it'd been spotted. June's insides turned to hot, molten iron. She pressed her shoulder blades against the boulder, its cold touch reaching through her jacket. She wondered what the bright red jacket looked like to the lion, if it might see its bright color and think she was poisonous. Her injured hand brushed the stick wedged against the boulder, sending burning fire through her scored palm. She gritted her teeth and closed her hand around the wood.

The lion came at her in a silent rush, bursting out of the underbrush in a fluid ripple of muscle under thick fur. June swung the stick around, trying to catch the huge cat before it could leap. She found her target, and there was a satisfying thump as she connected with the lion's nose. It skidded to the side, wheeling around for another attempt. Its pupils were huge, empty black discs, widened so it could see every move June made.

June brought her stick downward with a loud shout, sending up a puff of dust where it hit the trail between her and the hunter. The lion narrowed its eyes and a low growl bubbled out of its throat.

"Hah!" she shouted again, louder, higher pitched, and swung the stick around to her right. She choked up on the stick with both hands, ignoring the way the wood scraped against her fresh bandages. The lion moved toward her again, belly low to the ground, sinuous and sleek. She held its gaze, her breath heaving in her chest. The stick swished through the air again, right to left.

“Hah!” June yelled. “HAH!” she screamed, her yell echoing through the trees as her final swing connected with the huge cat’s nose. He jumped back and growled again. She held her stick in front of her, pointed at the green eyes still locked on hers. She felt like a rabbit, transfixed by hypnotic predator’s eyes. They held that way for a second, a day, a year.

The lion wheeled on its feet suddenly and turned away from her. As it loped silently away into the trees, the tip of its tail swished once-twice, back and forth. June watched it go for a few steps, her breath ragged. The big cat slipped between two stumps and was gone, vanished into the woods. She gripped the stick in her hand hard, but she couldn’t yet feel the bark biting into her abraded palms, little pieces of wood grinding into raw flesh. She turned her head toward the bushes next to the trail. They were covered in lush, green leaves, she saw, and the remnants of spring flowers still clung to them. She turned her head as if to consider this fact, this way and that, then was abruptly and quietly sick into the leaves.

It was well past dark when June returned to her campsite. The night had brought a chill with it, and she shivered as she fumbled with her car keys. The bandanna wrapped around her right hand was stiff with dried blood, making her movements clumsy and slow. She was finally able to slide the key home, unlock her car, and crawl into the passenger seat. She’d left a blanket in the car, and she draped it over her shoulders before opening up the cooler in the backseat. The first thing she found in the cooler was a package of thin-sliced turkey, and she ate it piece by piece, holding the package in her clawed, aching right hand.

She sat in her car for about two hours, she thought, before she made her way back out to her tent. Her clothes were easy to pack up; those she just threw loosely into the passenger footwell. She rolled up her sleeping bag as quickly as she could. Each time she heard a noise outside, she froze, terrified and wide-eyed until she could convince herself the cat wasn’t coming back. While she was rolling up her tent, she heard a crackle behind her, maybe the sound of paws on pine needles, and swung around with a tent stake in her left hand, breathing hard. There was nothing there: no teeth, no fur, no claws. Her stomach roiled, and she took a step away from the half-rolled tent in case she had to be sick again. When she wasn’t, she gathered the rest of the tent in a bunch and stuffed it in her trunk. She kept her car headlights turned off as she wound her way out of the snarl of camp road.

In the morning, the campground host found June’s campsite empty. She had left behind a sleeping bag and inflatable mattress, he saw, and what looked like a brand new pair of hiking boots. *Free*, read the note tucked into the right boot. *Sorry, no coffee this morning.*



ME AND IT, 2

Gill Ritchie

This new house has burns in the carpet which I didn't put there. Angry spirits roam through the radiator lining the wall opposite me. I am armed with two Native American blankets and a totally unearned sense that I know what I am doing when I speak loudly and firmly to the ghost which sent a jolt into my lower back at 1:30 in the morning. Rude, to say the least.

my guilt complex is riding the radiator like so much risotto and vodka eggnog, in my—

why do I—why do I feel like the radiator is my fault?

in other words, mirror neuron synesthesia is no fucking joke

when the universe is your best friend

thank G-d I'm not an atheist because that could literally kill me—

I think, sleep is on the other side of the moon tonight



Doing work on my soul as in digging into niches layered with grime, tucked into the corners where white walls meet. I have thoughts in my body which leer at me just beneath the surface. Sometimes they pull with curled fingers.



Moonlit snags of cigarette catch my lungs before they expand out of my back, toward you—unconscious holder of my volatile current. I sway, in and out, dizzied drunken observer. The dark black pit in this ever present mirror—in the center of my eye becomes larger until it consumes—everything, sending twitches like ripples across the bed

into my guilt complex.

I am wrong when I forget how silly it is. In this, I have not made mistakes, but do not mark me innocent.

Belly full of silence, of the sweat of hammering myself into someone I'd like to be. There is no sweeter success than stepping back and allowing.



The world breathes out. Peace in a tree with the branches sticking—I'm a little drunk, with burnt hands. I love a man I don't know, he does drugs and feels like safety.

Bony uncompromising silence in his pacemaker. I laugh with my body against his, in a few hours.

We are made in the image of G-d. What better place to learn?



leaning into my neck, the breath of golden optimism

the way the sun leans into the night sky, emerging





BUGS

Tyler Brown

There are a million little things fluttering through my mind,
Skittering across my conscience like terrified insects.
Each of them is without name,
Without shape.
A cacophony of noise rattles out of their desperate wings and hurried feet.

A light flashed into the eyes of a criminal,
Illuminates their erratic paths.
Look what you've done. Don't you see?
Surely you wish you didn't.
They don't fly away
They panic
And they pool together into pupils.
See how they shimmer.
It's the lucid black that ensnares the stars.

A dialogue between hopeless characters, held up in a flimsy charade
A saucer made of wet paper holds the portrait
And even so
It only echoes a conversation,
Chattering. Groaning. Laughing. Crying.
If only we could see what we carry.
The terrible little beasts.
Still.
Hold onto them all or you are nothing.
Rest is for the lost.





THE HOUSE IS YELLOW

Kaelyn Kaftan

The yellow wall of clouds grows on the horizon
 Its energy fills the air, humming
 Like the bass vibrations of taut horsehair
 Against the violin string 'G' —
 Low, ever on.

It sucks up the air, inhales the earth
 'Till its greed is satisfied. Seething
 The sky gasps, begs for breath,
 For oxygen,
 And there is no breathing room in battle.

And Earth, in all her wonder—
 Spinning chaos 'round a dying sun,
 Attempts to cry
 To groan
 Aching for all to breathe, to sleep.
 She aches for rest
 But the dusky yellow clouds grow still
 And there is no breathing room in battle.

And the battle, so dark,
 Like the lowest tone
 Of cello
 Like the ringing in all ears
 Grants no time for rest,
 Only the buzzing loss of
 Breath.

Time grows short.
 The walls of yellow clouds rage on still.
 The sun does not set today,
 The grief, in its everlasting rays—
 Illuminated.
 And there is no breathing room in battle.







the view from my back porch

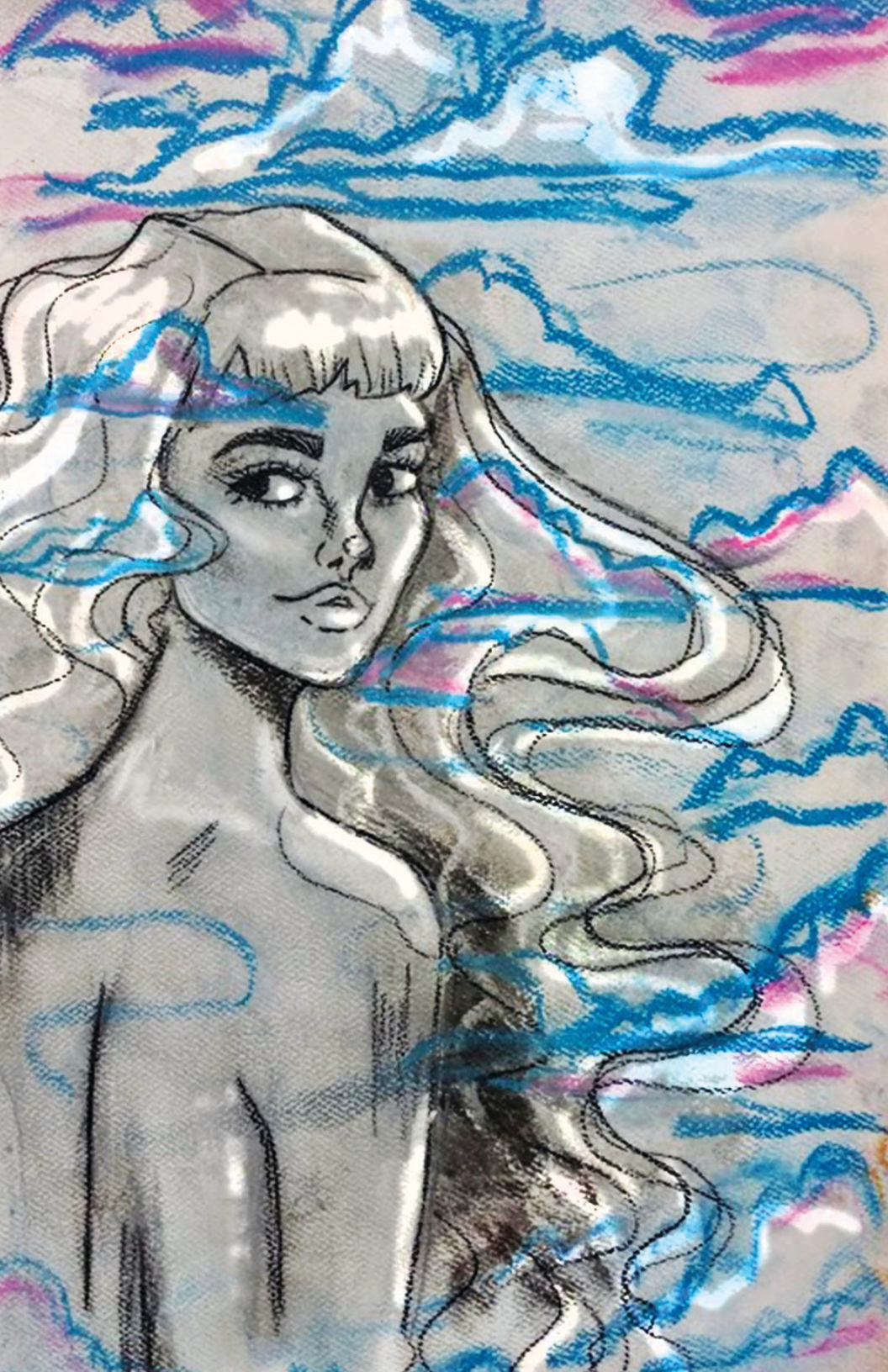
Erin Goudreau

sunk into my camp chair
 plunging my fork into the
 jar of tomatoes
 we canned
 from the garden
 sweet tangy
 and I reek of
 july
 a sweaty blissful month

the sounds of a
 domestic dispute
 are rattling the hinges
 next door
 again
 I close my eyes and consider
 calling
 making an official report
 again
 but I know they're cooking meth
 and I'm not trying to
 snitch
 again

this porch is just small enough for
 3 chairs and
 1 crate full of crushed empty white claw cans
 this porch is just big enough for me to

wear an
 extra-large bathrobe and a
 small smile
 as I look at a picture of us
 in white sulphur springs
 it was just you
 and me
 and cow pasture out there



THIS HOUSE

Dillon Knuffke

Even now, I can build it up in my mind.

Barren structure, made of wood and brick,
standing solemnly in a meadow of daisies.
White walls, gleaming in the morning sun,
dew drops covering the landscape.

There would be a subtle morning fog
seeping out of the trees bordering the meadow,
billowing out like a dragon's breath,
threatening the entire scenery.

Visitors would have to jump over
the first step leading into the house, as
it would moan violently, warning
the guest that it would drop them if tested.

The front door would creak elegantly,
but only those who had built this house
would learn to appreciate it
in its homeliness.

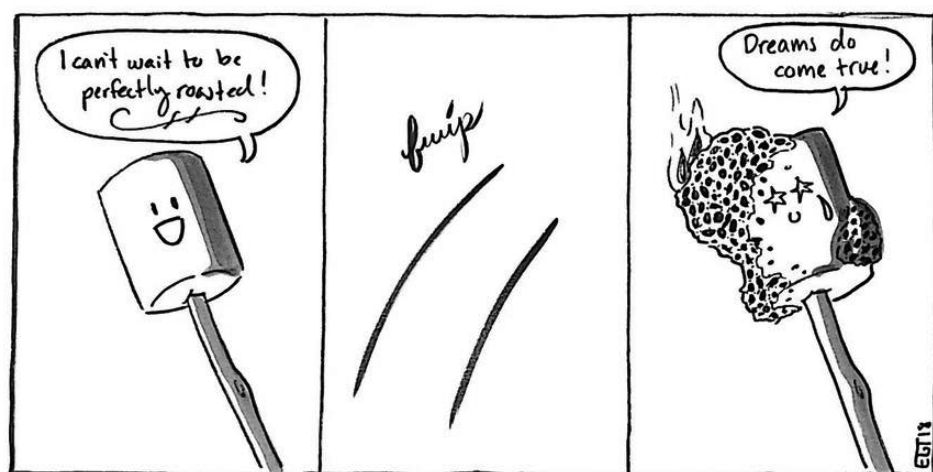
Pictures would cover the interior
with familiar smiles of the past.
Musical instruments would clutter the parlor,
as if they, too, were relaxing by the fire.

What evenings there would be
in front of the flickering flames.
Twisted blankets on the floor,
teacups on the mantle.

The only comfort of this house
can be found in the love of its makers,
Their hands calloused and
intertwined affectionately.

This house can only be found
in the stubborn memory of a dreamer,
Who never breathed the crisp morning air
or drank a coffee while staring out into the setting sun.

Even now, it crumbles in my hands.



A TRIP TO THE MOON

Dillon Knuffke

From the way it appears from Earth, it wouldn't seem like the moon is very far away at all. But it is, and this should be understood. There are hundreds of thousands of miles between our home and the long-romanticized rock that revolves around us. It takes *days* to reach the shimmering face that has looked down on us from the sky for so long. And, what you may know from an elementary education: days break into hours, hours break into minutes, and minutes break into seconds. This basic fact must be understood in order to empathize with the anguish of a moonman.

Seconds. Tick, tick, tick. I swear the fucking hand on my watch mocked me the entire journey. It screamed out to me from my wrist, as if saying, "Did you catch that, Atticus? That was another second! And another! And another!"

Needless for any explanation, I no longer wear a wristwatch. Nor do I count time by any means. I just let it pass and try and focus on the big picture.

The big picture? Before leaving the comfort of my atmosphere, I thought the big picture was the moon. I thought getting there was all that was important. Hell, I had been working toward that gleaming globe for my entire life, so, rightfully, I was pretty adamant about reaching it and pressing my footprint into its surface. My entire life had been spent training for the moment that I would walk on the moon. Actually, from what I've heard, it isn't much like walking at all; it is more of a step forward, and a deep prayer that your foot comes back down to the ground.

Now, the funny thing is that, for the entire trip, I was humming that old David Bowie song, "Space Oddity." I guess I found myself very much in Major Tom's shoes, or tin can. That feeling of helplessness that comes with the weightlessness of outer space is almost as gravitationally depressing as if I were back on Earth, having one of those nightmares where every movement I make seems to take an infinite amount of work and force.

I reckon that it was about the second day when I started to talk to myself. It started out as a simple "how are you," but progressed into rather in-depth conversations where feelings and emotions were at-large. I quickly became my only comfort and relied on myself for amusement. This is when my watch started growing in amplitude until I shattered the incessant piece of shit against the window of my prison cell.

You've never seen a sunrise or sunset from space because, well, they don't exist. And if they don't exist, and if I broke my watch against the win-

dow, was there any way of knowing what time it was? No. So time stretched endlessly, and the number of things to fill that time slowly became more and more sparse. I started to get into arguments with myself about foolish subjects such as this fun bit of schizophrenic irritation:

"Why'd you break the watch, you piece of shit?" I would ask as the deafening silence pressed on my eardrums.

"Because it was getting on my nerves," would be the smug reply that comes from the reflection on the window.

"You're gonna get us killed!"

"Relax, man, we're gonna die regardless of what I do or don't do. And nobody would have any knowledge of what led up to that death. Oh, and buddy, don't act like you don't want to die. There's a revolver in the compartment next to the toilet."

Toilet. That reminds me of the fact that, in a fury beyond my own will, I broke the suction tube, so I was left with my feces in plastic bags. Oh, David Bowie, it wasn't just a tin-can-of-a-spaceship. It was a toilet bowl.

How long ago was it that I passed the moon?

Well, if the calculations of those earth-bound scientists were correct, that would have been on the third day. And it definitely wasn't long after that when my billion-dollar capsule bumped into some space rock. In the moment, I wouldn't have perceived this abrupt jostling of my vehicle as a gift, or even a miracle. But it was. For when I hit it, the capsule began to spin, and the sun would rise and set in a matter of seconds through the view of my window. Rise. Set. Rise. Set.

Nine thousand, five hundred and sixty-seven.

Nine thousand, five hundred and sixty-seven sunrises, matched with the inevitable sunset that would come as the capsule spun and the sun disappeared from the view of the window.

So it had been some time, I figure. Some time since I flew completely adjacent to my destination. And it will be some time until the gun next to the toilet seems like something to cherish rather than fear.

Until that moment when I choose to pick up arms against myself and the horrors of my existence, I try to console myself and find security in the untethered, unbounded flight of an American astronaut. That is, an American astronaut whose scientists tragically miscalculated his route. Was it a mere unit of measurement inconsistency that brought me to my terrible position?

Was my destination the moon at all? Or was it someplace else in the system? Yes, yes. Perhaps it was Mars. There's been talk for some time about the exploration of Mars. I think I'm supposed to go to Mars. The Red Planet. And when I streak past that terrestrial being with a renewed dumbfoundedness, I'll look to Jupiter as my lord and savior.

Until then, which will be millions of sunrises away, I'll try not to consume myself with the terrifying truth that rises up in my gut. The terrifying realization that I left everything behind when I thought I was heading to-

ward everything. Since I am truly headed nowhere, the unavoidable conclusion is that I did indeed leave everything behind. And with this understanding, my truest feeling of loss is found.

Oh, how I long to feel my back against the bark of an oak, my toes slipping underneath the water of a creek, a soft breeze kissing my face. Oh, how I yearn for the smell of lavender to float into my nostrils. Oh, how I tire for the chance to hear the patter of rain on my window.

“Thanks for breaking the watch,” I say after possibly days of silence.

“You’re welcome,” replies the bearded madman in the window.

“I would’ve killed myself a long time ago if I knew how long it’s been since...”

“I know.”

The moon is pretty far away from Earth. Mars is further. Jupiter, much more so. My food won’t last much longer. My water’s absence will come sooner. Should I let nature take over and wait for starvation to kill me? Or should I have mercy on myself at this moment? Ah, I’ll save that philosophical debate for another day when hell’s mouth opens to accept yet another sorrowful man from nowhere, who was heading nowhere, and in no distinct measure of time.

THAT THING

Rose Gitlin

It was taken from me forcefully at first
Her hands gnawed at the heart strings until they snapped with weariness.
“We can’t hold on.”
They whispered to me,
Their color fading from red to charcoal as she burned a road
Through my manzanita forest morning and into me.
After the first logging, the road remained.
So that the second time, he had me easily.
The strings were used to moving;
They offered up ghosts of whispers at his back as he left.
That was well after the fact.
The third time was unremarkable.
The drawbridge to the heart
That once belonged to somebody
Opened of its own volition,
Before commandments were issued,
Before the issuer demanded rights to squat on my body.
The earth was cracked here, dry and barren,
The winds howled lonely empty threats to all who entered.
In the end, they whispered a good-bye to the body gratefully.
The fourth time,
His words came out of my dry lips,
A eulogy to the barren hole there.
“You deserve this.”
I said, simply and comfortingly, as if in solace to the dying.

My hands buried the body with triangular jags of rotten tongues,
All gone to waste from lounging too long in a mouth unused to speaking.
The body was not dead.
It stayed stagnant there instead of rotting,
It held up pieces of sweet sugar cakes for all who entered.
As the soul watched lazily,
The mind went mad.
It could not walk.
It could not defend.
Pieces laid strewn about in turmoil against the road
So that every step forward ached with memory.
After the fifth time, I stopped counting.



TRIVIA NIGHT

Tait Vigesaa

As I came nearer to the Lucky Stone Pub, I began to recognize John's too-tall and too-lean-to-be-inconspicuous frame idling outside of the brick building. He stood closer to the alley than the entrance. He seemed to carry a tension in hunched-up shoulders that were typically as relaxed as his demeanor, one that bordered between carefree and smug. He craned his neck around in a search for something or someone that I realized was me upon seeing his reaction to finding me. I hurried my pace to meet him at the side of the building. As I got closer, the smell of cigarettes from the idlers outside was quashed by John's heavy cologne as I approached him. It was a familiar and aggressive citrus which he always applied liberally.

"Ike! Where the fuck have you been?" he asked.

"Good to see you too. What? Am I late?"

John recollected himself with a deep breath as he glanced back toward the pub. "No. Trivia hasn't started yet."

"Cool, then what's the problem?"

"You didn't get my texts?"

"No. I left my phone at home. I'm trying to go without it. Be in the now ya know?"

John sighed again. "No, Ike. I don't know. Okay." He glanced over toward the bar again and then down the alleyway which was empty save for some homeless loiterers. "So here's the thing. You remember that job offer I passed on?"

"For that tech startup? Jance?"

"Janus. Yeah, that's the one. Well, they gave me a second offer. A better offer. And I'm taking it. I leave for San Francisco on Sunday."

John spoke energetically and with purposeful articulation, one of many traits that made him well-suited to the public relations work he excelled at. While John had been a climber and well-suited to the sharky world of business, my own talent in copywriting had never been enough on its own to propel me out of freelance hell. John was already earning more than I wanted to imagine, and a job at Janus Tech meant even more. So I congratulated him.

"That's great man. So I probably won't see you and Laura for a while I guess."

John looked around again to see if the coast was clear. "That's what I texted you about. I didn't tell Laura."

"Jesus, man. Really?"

"Don't give me that. I'm going to break up with her when we get home tonight alright? But I need you to play it cool tonight."

"Why would you tell me in the first place? Why not just *not* tell me? Then I don't know. Nothing easier than not knowing something I don't know."

John did the calculus of my statement in his head and then continued his pitch. "Just keep the secret tonight man. I want it to go easy for her so just help steer any conversation away from the future or relationship shit."

"So you want a breakup wingman?"

John's frown curled back into his familiar smirk. "Exactly. So what do you say?"

"No."

As I turned to walk away, I felt John's hand clamp over my arm.

"I forgot the cherry. I talked to Janus Tech about recruiting and they need a kick in the marketing department."

I stopped and turned to face John. "A job?"

His smirk remained and his eyes squinted as he snared me in. "And you don't even have to leave Kennewick."

"So a work-at-home gig. Are you serious?"

"Very. C'mon man. Just help me out. Just pretend you don't know what you don't know, right?"

I weighed the prospect of steady work against keeping my newly found knowledge quiet through a few rounds of trivia. I convinced myself that John's relationship was none of my business. A briefly shitty thing to endure that I didn't want to involve myself in the details of.

"Okay."

We walked back into the pub. The Lucky Stone had a narrow interior with a raised set of booths in the back corner. The bar stretched nearly the length of the room, cutting off before a small area with pool tables and keno machines. A large, mounted moose with a green bra hanging from an antler loomed above the bartender, a short man with a wiry, black mustache and fisherman's cap.

John led the way toward a booth where the girls were waiting.

"Hey, I found him," he declared.

"Long time no see," said Laura as she stood up to give me a hug.

Laura possessed a similar energy to John, but where his was calculated and directed, hers was excited in all directions and effortless. As she hugged me, I felt a twinge tense up my shoulders. The agreement had sounded easy in theory outside the bar, but I was beginning to realize that the actual act would be more difficult.

Laura reclaimed her seat by the window.

"We got here early so we could get this spot," she said.

"Sorry we started drinking before you guys," another voice said.

"Oh my God," said Laura. "I forgot to introduce Kelsey. Don't I have any manners at all?"

She playfully elbowed John as she directed this question at him. He looked at me while forcing a quick nervous laugh.

"Hi. I'm Kelsey." She offered her hand to shake mine. As I sat down next to her on our side of the booth, I noticed the smell of alcohol and vanilla perfume.

"We met at school," Kelsey stated. "She's a nurse. Did you know that? Do you want some margarita?"

"Not a nurse yet," said Laura, "but I'm pretty close."

"I'm going to grab some more drinks," John said, "but not for you." This was directed at Kelsey who feigned a pout.

I took Kelsey's offer and was sipping a tart and very alcoholic margarita when I noticed Laura's hand. It took an effort to make sure I swallowed the drink without letting it back up.

"Where, where did you get that? Is that..." I quickly recognized the panic in my voice and tried to tamp it down.

"Oh this?" Laura held out her hand in the way that engaged fiancées hold out their hands when they're engaged fiancées. "I guess we haven't seen you in a while. But John proposed just a couple months ago."

"Congratulations," I offered in disbelief as I searched toward the bar where John was supposed to be getting drinks.

Kelsey was busy tapping at her phone and intermittently laughing soundlessly to herself. Laura swirled a straw in her drink and looked toward the bar. I remembered that I was supposed to steer the conversation away from relationships, but an engagement was a different caliber of relationship that I was not prepared for.

John sat back down. I looked at him and Laura as if I were seeing them for the first time. I studied them for a moment before realizing that John was trying to signal something to me with a squinting, maybe twitching, eye. The noise of the bar began to dim in the background. A Joy Division song was playing from the jukebox.

Kelsey quietly implored, "Where will it end," to herself along with Ian Curtis.

Suddenly a voice interjected, amplified by a small PA system. "Welcome everyone to Trivia Night! I'm your emcee, Reggie, and we're gonna have some fun tonight."

Reggie stood in a cleared area next to the booths with a console on a table. For some reason, he wore a fake rasta wig hat with dreadlocks. He explained the rules and rounds and how the devices in our booths where we could input our answers were linked through Wi-Fi to a computer that Reggie was using.

"It's the future! No more paper!"

"Future..." Kelsey slurred.

"Make sure your phone is put away or we'll get disqualified," said Laura.

Kelsey pouted again and put her phone into an enormous, sequined

purse.

"Jesus," John said, "what do you keep in there?"

"Ohhhh...lotsa stuff. Makeup. Snacks. Some stickers. Mace."

"Can't be too careful," said John.

"Right? I always get hungry when I'm out and don't have any snacks."
Everyone laughed but Kelsey.

The first round of questions began with sports. Which we got mostly all wrong, save for my knowledge of Dock Ellis's acid-fueled no-hitter and Laura's esoteric knowledge of curling having originated in Scotland. Kelsey had pretty much checked out and John had been focused on keeping chitchat preoccupied with quiz strategy.

"So what's our strategy?" John asked.

"What if..." Laura offered, "we answer the right answers."

"I'm in favor of that one," I said. "How 'bout you Kelsey?"

Kelsey was dozing in the booth.

I gently poked her shoulder and she sprang up.

"Second wind!" she yelled, energetically but still clearly drunk.

The next round was music trivia.

"It's Apeman," I said.

"Huh?" said John.

"Yeah it's Apeman. Write down Apeman."

"How do you know all this stuff? It's crazy."

"I don't know. I just know a lot of stuff I wish I didn't that I might be better off not knowing, I guess."

I looked at John and his eyes locked on mine. The left one twitched once or twice. He let out a forced laugh, overly eager and designed to change the conversation.

"Hey, uh, how about another round. It's on me," he said.

"Thanks buddy."

The round continued until phones started going off. Reggie took the microphone and warned the audience.

"Hey guys, I hear a lot of phones going off. I don't want to have..."

A stout man approached Reggie, and he held the microphone to his chest and turned his head to hear him whisper. His eyes grew wide.

"Okay everybody," he stammered, "there's been a, uh, an incident. We're gonna turn the bar TV to the news and put a hold on trivia night."

The short bartender with the black mustache reached up to the flat screen above the bar to turn it on. As he searched the channels for breaking news, the bar was filled with murmurs and people holding their hands over their mouths as they read from their phones. In the relative quiet, a glass shattered somewhere in the back of the pub. Someone shouted, "Shit."

On the television, a white-haired news anchor was addressing the

country while a helicopter camera hovered above the Capitol building in D.C. The banner below the man read, "VICE PRESIDENT AND SENATORS SHOT AT CAPITOL BUILDING." The news ticker below gave developing details about a lone gunman that may have had ties to IEL, that there was a late-night vote where the vice president was present, and that the president had been taken to Camp David or some other secure location.

In our booth, John stared intently at the television. Laura stared through the table and fiddled with the ring on her finger. Kelsey tapped at her phone.

I stood up in a daze. My head felt heavy. I decided to walk home, but I came up with a cover. "Hey, I'm gonna step out for a smoke."

As I got up, John's attention snapped in my direction.

"I'll join you," he said.

Outside of the pub, I lit my cigarette and inhaled deeply. It was one of those moments where it tasted bad enough to quit. None of the pleasure. Just ash and tar.

Near the pub, a food truck had parked on the curb. The distinct smell of Indian food wafted in with the smoke, and I started to feel sick. Across the street at a bar called The Hard Place, punks loitered outside. The nervous air outside of the pub contrasted with the punks across the street who either didn't know or maybe didn't care.

"Give me one of those." John had appeared next to me and was pawing at my pack of cigarettes.

"I thought you didn't smoke."

"I don't but we need to regroup."

I gave him a cigarette and watched him hack and cough after inhaling. "What do you mean *regroup*?"

"Things have been going pretty well so far. But we have to keep trivia night going, ya know?"

"No, I don't know, man. I'm gonna call it. I'm going home."

"Hey, the reason I came out here is that there's talk about calling off trivia. Now, I don't mean to be insensitive, but I can't break up with you-know-who if everyone's just going to go home and sulk."

"Seriously?"

"Well...yeah. C'mon man you gotta help. Let's try and get spirits up in there. You got my back right?" John didn't wait for an answer but patted me hard on the back and went inside.

I stood on the curb and studied a young man across the way. He had a jean jacket with the sleeves cut off. A flaccid mohawk that rested over a face that looked like a boxer's. He noticed me and flipped me off. I returned the gesture. He smirked and gave an acknowledging nod.

I walked into a different atmosphere inside the bar. Reggie was gone, and John was leading the trivia hosting ceremonies. He stood on the bar and rattled off questions, trying to censor any that might be related to ei-

ther terrorism or romance, which was a difficult task in the movie round.

"In this Oliver Sto...uh, nope let's not do that one. Uh," he shuffled through the index cards, "here we go. In the opening scene of *The Godf... fuck!*" he muttered under his breath.

I sat down at the table where neither Laura nor Kelsey was engaged in playing trivia. Laura looked listlessly at her drink while Kelsey sipped a new drink. I felt a pain beginning to pulse behind my eyes, so I closed them and sat straight, leaning against the hard wooden back of the booth. I massaged my temples as I tried to drown out the sound of John's questions.

A moment passed, and surprisingly it was Kelsey that broke the silence in the booth. "You think it's terrorism?"

"Probably. Why would one guy do that?" Laura said.

"Lotta reasons," I offered, my eyes still closed.

"Amok," Kelsey whispered.

"What's that?" I asked, leaning back onto the table.

"It's this thing my grandma told me about. A normal person just snaps one day and goes out in this like violent blaze. It can happen to humans or animals. She said sometimes it would happen to rogue elephants and they would kill people for no reason."

She returned to her drink as Laura and I pondered the amok.

Slowly at first, but very steadily, the noise of John's awkward questions grew into a speech until it started to gain attention from the people in the bar.

"We cannot let the terrorists win! If we change anything about how this night should have gone then the terrorists win! Is that what you want? Do you want those motherfuckers to control your lives? Do you want to bow down to them?"

"NO!" was the resounding cry from the pub that grew louder with each question.

People were standing now and cheering. Clapping for John's empty gestures of patriotism. Laura was resting her head in one elbow of her folded arms on the table.

I leaned over and put a hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she answered through her arm in a muffled voice, "just a little drunk and a lot tired."

I leaned back against my seat. Laura began to breathe evenly, dozing into a nap. Kelsey had finished another drink. I finished a shot that had been left idle from before the news broke. I hadn't expected tequila, and it burned going down. I exhaled a hot breath and wiped the tears from my eyes. Laura snored, and Kelsey rocked in the corner even more drunk while the crowd continued to chant, "USA! USA!"

Then Kelsey said something to no one or maybe to me.

"So excited," she slurred.

"Excited?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm so excited."

“Why?”

“For San Francisco, silly.”

I felt a shock go through my body at this revelation. I stood up and ran to the bathroom, vomiting into the toilet but mostly on it and the wall behind. I spit into the toilet and wiped my nose with a wad of toilet paper. I stood up and walked toward the sink and drank from the faucet. I took handfuls of water and splashed my face. When I looked up to the mirror, I was confronted by my reflection. I was involved whether I liked it or not. I took two deep in-and-out breaths and walked out of the bathroom.

What I returned to in the pub was a room half-empty. The rowdier members of the group had formed a posse and were outside chanting. I looked at the mob outside and walked the long walk back toward the booth trying to come up with a way to explain. How to tell Laura. How to get her away from Kelsey. What to say.

As I came to the booth, Kelsey was now the one sleeping and Laura was awake staring into nowhere. I sat down and tried to find the right words but couldn't break the silence.

Laura spoke first. “It's just so fucked up.”

I froze and struggled to reply.

“It's okay,” she said, “we all process things differently. I've never known John to be so patriotic and feel so strongly. But if that's what helps him get through something like this...”

Tears welled in my eyes and I searched deep down in me for a reply. Even a single word to begin. Was now the right time?

Suddenly, I heard the crash of glass breaking behind me at the front of the pub. The cry of voices had turned from cheers to anger. The muffled noise from outside had entered the bar, and I stood up and walked quickly toward the entrance.

When I pushed open the door, I looked up the street to see a group of men rocking the food truck and yelling. John stood in the midst of them, motivating them and chanting. “Fuck you terrorist!” was the new chant that had caught on. I surveyed the scene in helplessness before I saw that some of the truck pushers were brawling in the street with the punks from across the street. The boxer-faced punk was kicking a man on the ground and making his way toward another group.

I walked toward where John was standing and grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him from the group. Surprised by the grab, he whipped around and backhanded me across the chest.

“What the fuck are you doing, John?”

“What does it look like, Ike? I'm leading a movement.”

John looked not unlike himself but like an exaggerated version. He still wore his smirk, but his face was gripped with an intensity that gave it a shine of menace. The mob continued to push the truck as others were picked off into individual tussles. John wiped spit from his mouth. He breathed heavily and was drenched in sweat. Underneath the sour smell

of sweat in the crowd lingered the faint bite of citrus cologne.

"Just go home. You've wanted to go home all night, so just go," he said.

"No. This is too far, John. Jesus, can't you see what you look like?"

"Why is everyone trying to hold me back? You're no better than Laura, you know that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"This whole fucking world, man. Everyone is out here trying to tell me what I can't do. Where I can't go. What I can't be. We can't let the terrorists win!"

John shoved me, and I tripped backward against the curb. I struggled to my feet.

"John. Listen to yourself. This was never about the terrorists. It was always about you covering your ass."

"Excuse me? What the fuck kind of friend are you anyway?"

"One who didn't used to know better."

I took a swing with all my strength at John. It was my first fight, so I barely grazed him on the jaw. I recoiled in surprise at the pain in my hand. John wiped his chin and checked for blood. The shock on his face curled back into his smirk as he lunged at me.

We fell to the ground, and my back hit the wet, hard pavement. John was over me, with both size and position to his advantage. He pummeled his fists into me as I tried to block him with my forearms, feeling the sharp stinging blows in my arms as I tried to protect my face.

"Are you a terrorist, Ike?"

"You're fucking insane!" I shouted.

My arms were exhausted and beat. With John kneeling on my chest, I struggled for breath as his knees dug into my ribs and ground my back into the pavement.

"You're gonna keep your fucking mouth shut!" John yelled.

I felt woozy, and the sound of the crowd and John's ravings started to become drowned out by the muffled and close sound of each blow. My vision began to blur as I felt the first punch connect to send a burning electricity through my face. I thought he would get up, but he punched again and then paused. I knew in my mind then that John wanted to kill me. I braced myself for the final blow but instead felt a wet burning in my eyes and nose. I started coughing as the weight of John fell off of me.

I rolled onto my side coughing and trying to rub my eyes to unblur my vision.

John howled like a mad man on the ground and clawed at his face and eyes.

Above both of us stood Laura with Kelsey's mace. She was breathing heavily and had clearly not finished processing what had just happened.

"What the fuck?! My fucking eyes!" John yelled.

I stood up clumsily and surveyed the scene. Many of the truck-pushers had dispersed, and the punks were back on the other side of the street.

John howled on the sidewalk. I walked over to him and kicked him in the stomach.

“What the hell is going on?” Laura asked, standing between us and the pub.

For better or worse I said it. All of it. The job, the plan, Kelsey. Through pauses to spit out pooled blood in my mouth or to try and recollect the order of events. What I knew and what I didn’t. Things that now made sense to Laura that seemed strange before. It was all out and I wasn’t carrying it anymore.

She asked a few stern questions to clarify fuzzy points. And then she stood there looking at me.

“If you need someone to talk to about all thi...”

She slapped me hard on the face, zapping all the areas already bruised and bleeding.

We stood there another moment before she opened her mouth to begin to say something but held it and left. I didn’t go after her. I didn’t stay to talk to the police. I didn’t go into the pub to talk to John or Kelsey.

Blood pooled again in my mouth, coppery and wet. I spit it onto the ground, and I turned and stepped off the curb. I walked across the street, my limbs aching, my eyes still watering. I made a motion toward my wallet pocket, but the man at the door waved it off and opened the heavy door to the bar and let me in.

Going down the stairs, I began to hear the faint chimes of a glockenspiel. The basement venue was filled with smoke and flashing lights, half-filled with enthusiastic bodies crowded tightly together as a band played a Ramones cover. It was a song I hadn’t heard, but I caught on to the chorus of “la la las” and joined in. I maneuvered my way tightly into the mass of bodies jumping up and down, shaking the floor. The buzz of guitars and thumping bass traveled through wires to rattle and resonate in my chest. The smell of sweat and smoke and alcohol and perfume all wafted into one. I swallowed the blood in my mouth and let my body become one among the pulsing mass.



SAMSARA

Joseph Valley

You medicate for patience and

Wither in my wake

Ignore the covert masses,

Said the skeptic,

Bend and break

In another now,

The Saviors in our heads

Burn and pollute the remedy

Where angels quail to tread

I haven't the time to help you

I waste away ignoring myself

But if God listens from the cliff's side

He counts our cries on the bathroom shelf

THE CARAMEL SAUCE INCIDENT

Trisha Bartle

My mom pushed our spare key into the lock and we stepped out of the musky corridor that smelled of moth balls and over-boiled Brussels sprouts into my grandparents' apartment. There was glass and gold in every corner, a monument to the modern 1990s aesthetic that Grandpa and Grandma so loved. The glass of the coffee table, knick-knack boxes and entertainment cabinet was beveled and etched with generic flowers. Each was trimmed in "gold" tubing that would flake off to reveal the cheap steel underneath if you were to take a knife to it. Beige, furry chairs with brown piping flanked their TV and entertainment center.

"Hello?" my mom called out, but of course she got no answer. This was our first visit into the winter season. My grandparents, John and Marge, were typical snowbirds. They escaped the intensely snowy and cold Minnesota winters for the comfort of their fifty-five-and-up trailer community in Scottsdale, Arizona, only to come back north after the thaw. Could you blame them? We even visited them down there on occasion. I'd take smutty erotica magazines from the free library in the elderly clubhouse and read them by the pool. Old, blue-haired ladies would drop them off on bingo nights. Oh, to be twelve.

While they were mostly retired, my grandma made extra money selling Luzier Cosmetics on the side. It was just like Mary Kay or Avon, but they didn't give her a pink Cadillac for being a good saleswoman. Instead, she got a pretty, metal tiara. You can't exactly sell makeup all the way in Arizona, though. Well, maybe you could, but rather than lugging a suitcase full of creams and eye shadows down to the Cactus State, she left the business in my mom's hands when they flew to Arizona. This year, I was thirteen and we'd gotten this thing down to a science. My mom would head into the office and listen to the answering machine filled with old ladies wanting their wrinkle serums and she'd fulfill orders from the well-stocked closet and cabinets. I had other ideas, though. I'd always head straight to the kitchen.

You know how, when you're heading out on a trip, you make sure you eat everything perishable in your kitchen? You fix yourself the last glass of milk or decide if the expiration date on the jar of Miracle Whip is just a suggestion, or if you really need to make a tuna sandwich right now despite needing to catch a plane in two hours. But you eat it, just in case, all because you don't want to come home a week later to a home reeking of spoiled food.

Yeah, my grandparents didn't do any of that. They left their kitchen just as it always was, even though they'd be gone for at least four months.

Why? Because they knew we'd eat it all, even the pantry foods that could theoretically withstand the long winter. Sure, my mom was getting paid with real non-Monopoly money for helping grandma with her cosmetics business, but our unspoken, under-the-table pay was also a kitchen full of food. The reasons were twofold: We were poor, and we were a family of eaters. What did a family of eaters do? We might stand in our kitchen and eat an entire bag of Doritos with cream cheese for dip. We'd go to McDonald's so often that I have a medium-sized plastic trash can full of McDonald's Happy Meal toys taking up residence in my storage closet to this day. So, my grandparents knew that when they'd eventually get back from Scottsdale, they wouldn't come home to the stench of death, but a nice empty kitchen. You're welcome.

While my mom punched the "Messages" button on the old-fashioned answering machine in the office, I made my preliminary walkthrough of the kitchen. I made a mental note every time I came upon something I knew we'd want to eat. Jiffy Chocolate Frosting mix? Hell yeah. A jar of black olives? Not for me, thanks, but my brother would be down for those salty treats. Plain Cheerios? Sure, beggars can't be choosers. Then, after working through all the cupboards, I ended my circuit by cracking open the refrigerator. My eyes lit on something that had never made an appearance in my grandparents' kitchen in the years we'd been doing this: a tub of caramel sauce. This was the stuff you'd typically find in the fruit section of the grocery store. It'd be in a white plastic tub next to the apples, making all the children who walked past think, "that's the only way you'll ever get me to eat something healthy, *Mom*."

I stopped everything I was doing. I only had eyes for this caramel sauce. I grabbed it and shouldered the refrigerator door shut. A quick trip to a drawer produced a hefty spoon and I settled on a chair at their kitchen table. I popped open the plastic tub and was only briefly disappointed. The container of golden goodness was only about a third full. Then I remembered: Some caramel sauce is better than no caramel sauce. Bolstered by this realization, I dipped the spoon in the caramel and brought it up to my mouth. Strings of the stuff connected from spoon to tub. Its sweet-yet-slightly-salty taste spread over my mouth and I let out a little moan.

Staring at me while I chowed down on caramel slop was a large portrait of my grandpa. He sat in front of a black backdrop and was surrounded by a thick, ornate gilt frame. The photographer must have had a magic touch, because my normally stoic and a little-unpleasant grandpa was actually smiling in that picture. He wore a dark suit and a red tie with his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. This portrait was a little old at this point. When I was sitting there with that tub of caramel, he was warming up in the Arizona sunshine with very little stark-white hair left on his head. But, in this portrait, the halo of white extended almost halfway up his head. Perhaps that's why the portrait still hung on the wall—he likely missed that golden era when he was only partially bald.

My grandma didn't have any portraits on the wall, but her energy was bigger than his could ever be. She was a boisterous extrovert with a jovial smile and loud laughter that could clatter through the whole room. Back when they still had Christmas in Minnesota, they'd plug their Christmas

tree lights into one of those old-school as-seen-on-TV Clappers that you'd turn on and off with a clap of your hands. Every year, she'd have a Christmas party for all her best Luzier customers and my mom and I would get to come. I didn't mind, I always got to walk away with a new Christmas ornament.

Grandma would be entertaining her guests and letting out peals of laughter at even the slightest jokes. Every time she laughed, the Christmas tree would blink off, which would only incite more laughter. Eventually, because she'd undoubtedly have a cocktail glass in one hand, she'd slap the side of her ass to clap the tree back on again.

For the entire time I knew her, my grandma always looked the same. She was short, squat, and wore matching shirt-and-pants combos in shades of coral or turquoise. She'd even get her shoes and chunky plastic jewelry to match. Just like Grandpa, she'd gone gray well before I'd met her. But, unlike him, she wasn't prepared to walk around with bright white hair. Instead, she attempted to color it red. As any hairdresser will tell you, it's damn-near impossible to turn gray-white hair the color it looks like on the box of dye. So, instead of a natural red, she'd have bright fire-orange hair, short and coiffed like a traditional kind of grandmother you'd see in a Lifetime movie, giving sage advice to the protagonist just before passing away right before the credits rolled.

So, while it was only a large portrait of my white-haired Grandpa gazing at me from the wall as I ate their caramel, I could also feel my grandma's vibrancy in the way he smiled out at me. I sat there, munching caramel, when my mom came in from the other room. Since my grandparents had only been gone for a few days, there wasn't much work for her in there. She stepped into the kitchen, saw me hunched over the tub of caramel sauce, walked over to the drawer, grabbed a spoon and joined me. We smiled at each other as we experienced the unique joy of eating caramel when we thought we'd just be finishing off cereal or old boxes of mac and cheese. We worked our magic in silence, the crest of the caramel getting lower and lower in that classic white tub.

We were very near the bottom when I noticed two things at once.

First, I saw that there were thin, old drizzle marks all over the inside and outside of the tub of caramel. It looked like it had been drizzled many times while in the care of my grandparents. They used it sparingly over the occasional slice of pie, perhaps? The drizzles on the inside led me to believe that maybe, if they had poured out too much caramel, they poured the leftovers back into the tub. It's common knowledge that the elderly like to scrimp and save to stretch out that pension money for as long as possible. Maybe that explains it?

But at the same time I noticed those drizzles of old caramel, I also noticed what was stuck to them. On the inside and outside of the plastic tub of caramel sauce were short, kinky dark hairs. I repeat: stuck inside the tub of my white-haired and orange-haired grandparents' caramel sauce were *short, kinky dark hairs*.

I dropped my spoon in horror and it clanged onto the tile floor. My eyes were wide and my mouth was twisted in disgust. My mom paused, having just slid an empty spoon from her mouth.

“What? What’s wrong?” She looked worried.

I couldn’t speak. I could only point, horrified, at the tub. Her eyes followed my finger and alighted on the offending drizzles and hairs. There was a pause...and then we both screamed.

We spat in the sink. We ran around the room as if we could hide from the realization that had slapped us both across the face, but there was nowhere to hide. We shook our hands in the air as if flicking off water from our fingers, yet the dirtiness couldn’t be flung. We didn’t have to discuss what happened, nor would we have wanted to. Sure, I was thirteen, but I was a smart, worldly thirteen. I knew what those drizzles and those hairs meant.

After we settled down just a bit—though how could you ever truly recover from something like this?—my mom turned to me and said, “We have to call Shawn.”

My brother benefited from the annual Feasting that happened every time my grandparents went out of town, though only peripherally. He was six years older than me, a substantial nineteen at this time, and was too cool to come over to our grandparents’ to raid the kitchen. He’d just wait until we brought home a paper bag full of goods before tucking into the score.

Even though my mom was done with the Luzier side of the night’s events and we only lived five minutes away from our grandparents’ fifty-five-and-up apartment, we had to share this story with him right that very second. The story seeped from our pores just as the caramel made its slow way through our now-queasy digestive systems. The story needed to be purged. Not in five minutes. Now. So, my mom picked up the landline and dialed our place. After a few rings, Shawn picked up.

“Hello?” he asked, slightly annoyed. Shawn was always at least a little put-out about anything that could be happening at any given time.

“Shawn,” my mom said with her Serious Voice activated.

“Uh oh, what?” he said.

My mom relayed what happened. She told it in slow detail, working her way through the happenings, one spoonful of caramel sauce at a time. When she got to the climax, as it were, and described the drizzles, the hair, I could hear my brother’s scream spike out from the receiver.

“No! Noooooo!”

Some stories just stick with you. This sticky story of creamy, dirty caramel sauce has clung to me, my mom and my brother for decades now. It sits with us, it rides in the recesses of our memories. And, whenever I’m at the grocery store with my mom and I spot a tub of caramel sauce on a little shelf next to the apples, I point at it and we both scream.

Just like that day when we called my brother, this story isn’t one I can keep to myself. If ever there’s a story that can horrify a listener, it’s the one about the time I ate my grandparents’ sex caramel.

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TRISHA BARTLE is a creative writing and German major set to graduate in 2020.

SYDNEY BEAN is a media arts major working towards a career in the graphic design field. She likes to draw, read, and write on her down time and enjoys drawing digitally.

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SARA DIGGINS is a photographer and visual artist. While she spends most of her time pursuing photojournalism, she can occasionally scrape out some time for art—softly focused photography using light and color or intricate line drawings using way too many ballpoint pens.

ROSE GITLIN was raised in the commune/organic/biodynamic tradition of rural NorCal, which prompted a curiosity for the rest of the world and a foundation in using her hands. Some years of hitchhiking and farming through some European countries and other places closer to here left a strong impact, and backpacking and walking out-of-doors continues to keep her sane. Most days she inhabits a cellar-turned-ceramics studio located on the UM campus.

ERIN GOUDREAU is a fifth-year senior at the University of Montana, with plans to finally take the plunge and graduate this May. She's a student in the history and English departments, with concentrations in literature and creative writing. When not in class, Erin can be found in the *Montana Kaimin* office editing the Arts and Culture section, playing country music (the good kind), watching *The Bachelor* with her roommates, writing poetry, and driving to the Flathead Valley to see her sweetie. See? Women CAN have it all.

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GRACE HELD is a second-year creative writing student at the University of Montana. Born and raised in Sacramento, California, Grace hopes to begin a career in writing after graduating from college.

KELAIAH HORAT is now a senior in violin music performance at the University of Montana. She adores the diverse forms of arts, and seeks to merge artistic expression in an inclusive and future-oriented manner. She has recently been influenced especially by sculptures and writings found in graveyards. Kelaiah loves to cook, practice French, and wander into the mountains.

KAELYN KAFTAN was born in Havre, Montana on February 27th of 2000. She was homeschooled until the age of fifteen and through her time at home focused mainly on writing fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. By the age of seventeen she completed two small poetry books and several short fiction pieces. In her senior year of high school she joined theater and was inspired to apply to the University of Montana to further her education and hone her discovered talents as much as possible. In April of 2018 she was accepted into the university as a creative writing major and theater minor. She continues to feverishly write poetry and is currently working to finish the beginning drafts for a nonfiction piece covering past experiences with death, near-suicides, and theater besides. She hopes to publish her greater works in the future and continues her studies fervently in order to achieve her goals and learn as much as possible.

DILLON KNUFFKE is a junior studying English with a concentration in creative writing. Writing has been his method of understanding himself and the world around him and he tries to encapsulate his own feelings in a way that attempts to relate himself to others. He places his primary writing focus on identity and belonging, as his poetry and prose generally confront a confusion of senses/setting that coincides with the ambiguity that life sometimes confronts people with.

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GILL RITCHIE is graduating this spring with a community health major and global public health minor. She also organized the 2019 Mental Health Awareness Week at UM. She loves most things and is ambivalent about others. She has no idea what she's doing after college but has a good feeling about it. Hobbies—being with friends, eating, asking questions, meditating.

ERIN SARGENT is a journalism student at the University of Montana. She writes for the *Montana Kaimin* and dances in the UM dance program. Erin took one poetry workshop freshman year and fell in love.

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SAVANNAH STEWART is a senior at the University of Montana. She is majoring in wildlife biology and minoring in climate change studies. Savannah grew up in the foothills of California and grew to love all things nature while exploring the beautiful Sierra Nevada mountains. This inspired her to pursue a career in wildlife biology and to photograph the world around her.

EMMA THORP is a senior of the Davidson Honors College majoring in visual art. She will be graduating this spring and will move back to Tacoma, WA upon getting her degree. She is a comics artist and plans to write and publish graphic novels. You can follow her art on Instagram @egthorp_art.

JOSEPH VALLEY is an undergraduate in his senior year at the University of Montana. Attending school from Eagle River, Alaska, he will be graduating with a degree in history in May 2019. Born into a military family, he moved from Colorado, to Iceland, to Virginia, and then finally settled in Alaska where he completed most of his primary education. Upon graduating, he hopes to work in a professional capacity where he can write either for his career or as a passionate hobby on the side.

TAIT VIGESAA was born in Montana. He lives with his dog and has no strong feelings about pineapple on pizza.

PATTIE WAGNER is a senior at University of Montana, pursuing a degree in geosciences. She was born and raised in Helena, Montana but has called Missoula home since 2004. When she isn't writing, she enjoys hiking, cooking, and looking at interesting rocks.

AUSTIN WALD is a student at here at the University studying sociology and journalism. He grew up in Bismarck but he has been in Montana the last four years. He loves yoga, poetry, and has worked as a licensed massage therapist the last few years. He is excited to be exploring new academic avenues and is so grateful for being here.

JULIA WHITE is a modern and classical languages major at UM. She is from Helena, Montana, and has done several study abroad programs in Japan.

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HONORABLE MENTIONS

WHAT LEAVES THE WOODS

TRISHA BARTLE

THE HOLY AND HIDDEN HEART

NOAH BELANGER

FINAL FLIGHT

SIERRA GIDEON

BABY BIRDS

MICHAEL MERLOT

KNOTS

RALEIGH NORDHAGEN

COURTING MYSELF IN THE 22ND CENTURY

GILLIAN RITCHIE

A SOUNDING

MATTHEW SANFORD

THAT NIGHT IN PORTLAND

NICHOLAS SODERBURG

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